

George Ferard

Oxford: October 1952- July 1955

I went up to University College Oxford in October 1952 - third generation after my father and Ferard grandfather (Harry Ferard, known as Uncle Harry). My second cousin Tim Reeve had been at Univ, and his younger brother Michael came up just after I left - their Ferard grandfather Uncle Arthur was also at Univ. Tim was already established as a partner in a city stockbrokers by 1952 and took me out a couple of times when up doing business with the college.

I regret not making more of my time at Oxford. I had failed to get a scholarship (Chemistry/Biology) - not surprising as I did no work in my last year at Winchester. I came up to read Agriculture, which my father had advised partly because he knew I liked the outdoor life and partly because he reckoned it was a “safe” career - the world needed to grow food. But it bored me, and I should have switched; I was too slapdash to be a good scientist, and I would have been happier reading PPE or Modern History. As it was, no one in college was involved in Agriculture, and I found myself marooned with the twelve others in my year at the small Agricultural School on the Parks Road near Keble. Some of these had family farms to go to (Cirencester was more popular for estate management) and the rest had their eyes on the colonial service or companies running plantations.

After Collections, I had no exams to worry me and I did the bare minimum of work - and in my final year, never went to a lecture. About six weeks before schools, I realised that I stood a real risk of not even getting a pass degree, and frantic revision got me a Third.

In my first year I rowed in Torpids which was socially useful for someone with no academic contacts in college - it helped me make

friends and I used to go down to the college beer cellar before Hall most nights. But at eleven stone, I had no future as an oar so I gave up rowing except sculling which I enjoyed. I played a lot of squash and used to turn out for the college second team. I never tried or wanted to run cross-country again.

I never joined the Union, but became an active member of the College debating society and spoke at JCR meetings. In due course I became President of the Oxford University Plough Club (the Agricultural Club) - which I thought would look good on my CV; we asked down MPs and agricultural pundits to talk to us. After a hotly contested election, I found myself “Master of College Tortoises” during my last year. There were three college tortoises which one occasionally stumbled over in the summer (they had the college arms painted on their shells) but they were looked after by the Butler, and the job of the MCT was to make two funny speeches in the JCR - mine went down reasonably well.

During my first year, I shared rooms with a modern-history scholar from Ampleforth - Tony Firth. We moved in quite different circles but got on well enough and tolerated each others friends. Tony played bridge and I played poker (and started smoking). He went to wine tastings and I drank beer - mainly in college, The Eastgate, and (in summer when punting) The Victoria Arms. Tony got his expected First, became a history fellow (he is still Emeritus) and then Principal of Goldsmiths College in London. In my second year I had nice rooms of my own, and in my final year digs out of town.

In my second term I bought a 49 cc Italian engine called a Cucciolo to fit onto my Raleigh bicycle - it drove through the chain, and was unusual in being four-stroke - so unusual that I never saw another and neither had the garages it frequently visited.. The engine was too powerful for the chain, which often broke. But I had a lot of fun going down to the West End and coming back late at night

when I had to climb in over nasty spikes in Merton Lane, and it took me down to the Coronation, which I watched from Hyde Park Corner. On my first Easter vacation, I toured Scotland (which I had never seen) for three weeks, covering an enormous mileage including Skye, and both coasts. It was a tough trip with many breakdowns when I had to push or pedal to garages. I slept in a little conical tent and was often very cold (see photo of the tent in snow near Thurso). Every day I used to stuff myself and my pockets with the unlimited food which Scottish hotels provided for tea - my daily meal. By my last term bike and engine were pretty well finished, and I left them in the college bike shed when I went down.

As I had become interested in photography in Malaya, I joined the OU Camera Club which had decent darkroom facilities in Beaumont Street. I bought a plate camera and in my second year won the "best photo" award in our annual exhibition at the Ashmolean. I also did portrait and group photography (for money) and became photographer/reporter for "Cherwell", which printed my pictures of Roger Bannister collapsing on the line after running the first four minute mile.

In my last year I took two photos of every college summer eight (overhead and side), rushed proofs to Captains of Boats, and took nearly all the business away from the professionals who normally supplied the pictures - I was cheaper, delivered faster, and my print quality was as good. After paying two undergraduates to do the tedious full plate enlarging and mounting, I made a sizeable profit on about 350 orders. I was approached and (rather unwisely) agreed to be the cine photographer on a university expedition to an unexplored part of British Guiana, but (perhaps fortunately as I had no experience of cine work) it was cancelled due to lack of funding..

In my second term I asked a girl out for the first time - Priscilla, reading English at LMH. We lasted about four months - I took her punting on the Cherwell, we played tennis together, and I remember teas at her college. Our behaviour was pretty decorous (she was only nineteen and came from a nice home) and she finally dropped me before the end of the summer term, which left me slightly more experienced and emotionally unencumbered for the long vacation, largely spent at two NUS fruit picking camps. The first camp was plums at Wisbech in Norfolk (where I had an educational fortnight with a street-wise girl called Margaret about 3 years older than me) followed by strawberries near Malvern. This was great fun - the farmer, Mr Ballard, put us up in tents and allowed us to play on his tennis court. When the strawberry fields were commercially exhausted, I got Ballard's permission for four of us to pick on our own account - in return for tent rent. We sold the strawberries door to door around the Malvern hotels for about a week (until the fields really were picked out), and made good money. One of the four was my third girl friend - an attractive redhead called Ilene Courtney from Nenagh, Tipperary. We made tentative plans (never realised) to get together in Ireland and wrote to each other until Xmas. I did not take another girl out until the following summer!

After leaving Malvern I arranged to meet up with a college friend (John Kay-Mouatt from Alderney) at Grimsby - we had agreed to go as crew for two weeks on an Iceland trawler. My Cucciolo broke down on the way, and although I got a lift to the Grimsby turn on the A1 where I stood for four hours thumbing desperately, I could not reach the boat in time and John sailed without me. He had a horrific time - cold, mountainous seas, awful quarters, no sleep, and pervading fishy smells - and was always convinced that I had chickened out!

In the summer vacation of 1954 I went down to Bournemouth to try and make serious money out of beach photography - one of my

friends knew someone who had done well at Brighton. I fixed on Southbourne beach as the best pitch - it was packed with nice lower middle-class families every day unless raining - and arranged “digs” nearby. There were two “professional” photographers who haunted the various “walks” to the beach, took unsolicited pictures of families on their way down, and then tried to extort money, promising the pictures the next day. No doubt they made a living, but it seemed to me that they had got several things wrong - their image (dirty mac types), their location, and their insistence on money up front. If I had tried to muscle in on their patch, things might have got nasty, and I decided to take all my pictures on the beach, to be friendly and open, and to ask for no money up front - the finished prints would be posted without commitment.

A local photographic shop hired me a good 35mm camera, supplied film, and developed and enlarged overnight to finished postcard size for 6d/print. With postage and stationery (including an order form for extra prints) my total costs were about 9d. I charged 2/3d, which gave me a gross margin of 18d. I got paid (money sent to photo shop) for about 70% of the pictures I posted and about a third of those ordered further prints. I shot about three rolls a day (say 110 prints), and spent two hours first thing every morning dealing with despatches and reorders.

On the beach I discovered that it was vital to be quickly perceived as in demand – after a few rejections seen by all nearby families, one might as well go home – and this led to my “Two Camera Ploy”. In addition to my hired 35mm camera, I carried my (empty) Rolleiflex. If I got a second rejection after arriving on the beach, I used to say something like “Fine, but would you mind if I took some photos (for exhibition) of your little boy (or girl) with my big camera?” and they nearly always said “go ahead”. I would then spend five minutes chasing some spotty youngster in and out of the sea taking shots with my empty Rolleiflex while being watched by all the families nearby. Usually the child’s parents then asked me

to take a commercial snap after all, but more relevantly my antics always triggered a “feeding mania” with families queuing for my services!

In my second week a friend and I picked up two girls from Fishponds, Bristol, on the first day on their holiday and I took out Jenny (the blonde) every night for 3 weeks - we got on really well and she said she liked me better (“in every way”) than her working class boyfriend, who she was “going with” and seemed doomed to marry! It was a carefree relationship, without strings, which suited us both. I failed to replace her, and went home to Ireland after seven weeks, handing over reorders to the shop - significant income continued for some time.

Although I made some good friends at Univ, I was not - at least by Dominic and Sally’s standards - proficient at keeping up with them. By 1956 - a year after I came down - I was in touch with half a dozen friends in London, and in 1957 I was still meeting three regularly at The Windsor Castle - I took Val to a couple of their parties. By then I had a busy social life, and did nothing to keep in touch. But Val always said that she found my Univ friends more interesting than the Roehampton crowd that displaced them!

GCF 1999

GCF 2005: Not much new to report. I went down to a do in the Master’s Garden with Dominic and Sally, and met some old friends – although I think we had mutual problems recognising each other! Tony Firth never married, retired to a cottage near his old school Ampleforth, and recently died.