

George Ferard

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by Dominic Ferard

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My father was a dynamic and enthusiastic man who made an instant impression on all who met him. He naturally dominated conversation and it was a joy to be in his life-giving presence. He was a born competitor, a natural entrepreneur, a risk-taker and leader. He could be tactless and insensitive, but he meant no offence, held no grudges and had no side. He always played to win – whether in play, business or argument. As a child I grew up with ferocious debating around the dinner table, and he gave no quarter.

George Ferard was born in 1932 in what was then the North-West Frontier Province of British India; an early memory was of his mother's frantic reaction when she found him flicking at a scorpion as it struck back at him. He described himself as a 'lonely delicate and obsessive' child though this is hard to square with the man. He was an avid young collector – of dead crabs, caterpillars, pots and pans, carpentry tools, and then stamps (a modest selection, fortunately only of the latter, survives).

More characteristic were the early signs of entrepreneurial flair. At the age of 9, on the Isle of Wight, he became the best prawner on the Bembridge reefs, giving advice to the locals and selling his catch for 2/- per hundred; he also picked mushrooms at a derelict airstrip and (to his parents' chagrin) sold them door to door.

He came up to Univ from Winchester to read Agriculture in 1952, after completing his National Service in Malaya. He had been encouraged by

his father to do a 'useful' subject, and heartily detested it. His main recollections in this period were of rowing, squash and girls; and he was particularly proud of his photos for *Cherwell* of Roger Bannister completing the first four minute mile.

His business instincts had not gone away. In the summer vacation of 1954 he used his new-found skill with a camera on Bournemouth beach approaching families for photographs on approval. *'I discovered it was vital immediately to be perceived as in demand – after a few rejections seen by everyone around, one might as well go home – and this led to my "Two Camera Ploy". If I got a second rejection after arriving on the beach, I used to say "Would you mind if I took some photos of your little boy (or girl) with my exhibition camera?" and they nearly always said "go ahead". I would spend five minutes chasing some spotty youngster in and out of the sea taking shots with a camera that in fact had no film, but my antics always triggered a "feeding mania" with families round about queuing for my services.'* Such an approach to parents would probably elicit a rather different response in these more suspicious times!

His lack of academic application produced an undistinguished degree, so despite having been both President of the Oxford University Plough Club and Master of College Tortoises, it took him a while before he secured a 'decent' job in London - with ICI in 1956. In 1958 he was seconded to Kenya and, in between selling a lot of fertilizer, wrote to both his girlfriends of the extraordinary beauty of the country and, acerbically, of the social idiosyncrasies of a white-dominated society which was soon to change for ever.

Confused by too much sun, or planters' punch, he managed to transpose the addresses of these letters and so was fortunate to have even one girlfriend (Valerie Harper) to meet him upon his return to London. In 1961 they married and in due course this joyous loving couple had three children: Dominic, Rupert and Camilla.

In 1965 a promotion brought him to North-East England, but the charm of a job with a massive corporation with its internal politics was waning. Helping his mother-in-law with some inherited property, he discovered a field in which he could be his own master and prove to himself his capability. In 1973 he left ICI to develop 'Stockton Flats', his own property business.

He took big risks but he was also hands-on. He would paint rooms, buy furniture at auction and transport it in his Transit van, and lay carpets. He would vet tenants, take rent, go to the bank and prepare the accounts. He had no primer, no property-investor TV tip show, and no friends or contacts already in the business. He worked it all out as he went along, relishing the challenges and the sense of achievement that he got from overcoming them.

His timing was terrible: the market crash of 1974 saw not only plummeting values with banks refusing credit but also, unlike the present case, soaring interest rates – not ideal for a young property business built on borrowed money. For a time he was dependent on loan sharks, but the risk-taking and the hard work paid off and eventually the business flourished.

In 1997 my mother died quite suddenly and for my father it was as if he had lost a half of himself. Outwardly he pulled himself together and threw himself back into social life and into work. Less than a year later he was told he had terminal cancer, but carried on with life as normal, and until much later told only his family.

He appeared to be his old ebullient self; a generous and enthusiastic host who took huge pleasure in the company of friends. He loved his four grandchildren unconditionally, and in his inimitable style would show off about them as shamelessly as ever. He assembled new property portfolios at work, and even undertook a campaign single-handed against the introduction of Housing Allowances, winning several

changes to the legislation. But under that bravado there was a deep sadness and a burning sense of loss.

I will always revere his memory: for his love, his generosity, the sheer force of his personality and his drive, for having the courage to push himself forward and take risks, for his determination to live up to the standard he set himself, and for his bravery during his long illness.