

## REMEMBERING BOB

I'm going to read some memories of Bob which have been put together by his sister Barbara, including memories about Bob's life and business from Janet, Kathy, John and Sue. I think these are especially important because the crisis that we're facing round the world today means that so few of Bob's friends can be present here in Beckenham today. And I know that the videocast is being watched not just by some of those in Britain who can't be here today, but also in Hong Kong, in Sydney and in Brisbane.

Bob was born in 1947, the year of the Big Snow. With Mum in the car ready to go to Stone Park Maternity Hospital in Beckenham, the car wouldn't start, and Dad had to hand crank it to get the engine to fire up. Eventually they arrived at the hospital – but only just in time.

At five months old Bob was judged to be Best Baby in Show at a West Wickham Fair and Fete, something which he never let people forget.

When he was nine or ten, Bob used to take Barbara to the children's Saturday morning pictures in West Wickham – there was a cinema where Boots is now. He was told to hold her hand there and back, and he did, well, she says, most of the way. She also remembers how he used to take her to collect frogspawn in a large boggy area known as The Dip – now Glebe Way in West Wickham. One day she fell in – it was her fault, but Bob was the one told off for not taking care of his little sister!

Bob went to Hawes Down School, but as it was only a short walk from home he was often late and had often forgotten vital equipment. He frequently lost his blazer, cap, etc - something that continued throughout his adulthood. He did things his own way and in his own time, and even had his own timezone – there was GMT and Bob Time.

As a young lad he was interested in motorbike racing (John Surtees) and Formula 1 (Graham Hill). This developed into an interest in old sports cars. At one stage he had a Riley sports saloon and later a TVR, a sports car with a fibreglass body. He joined the Eden Park 100 Motor Club where he forged many friendships which lasted throughout his life.

Bob's music collection included Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, The Rolling Stones, amongst many others. He was a great fan of the swing band, The Jive Aces – “uplifting and happy music to put you in a good mood”. He used to go to their annual charity festival, Summertime Swing, in East Grinstead. We will hear from the Jive Aces at the end of the ceremony.

The family upholstery business in Camberwell formed a huge part of Bob's life. The business was started by his great-grandfather James Fowlds in 1870, so Bob was the fourth generation in a family of upholsterers. He began working there as an apprentice furniture maker when he was about 17, and continued doing so until last month, surrounded by his tools of the trade. The firm did work for many important clients including the Houses of Parliament and TV programmes like *The One Show* and *Big Brother*.

He was very proud of the family business, and felt a responsibility to continue it, and take it through to the 21st century. He had a strong sense of history.

Bob ran a tight ship, keeping meticulous records in the office, rarely throwing out papers and documents from decades ago. He liked a challenge and took on many complicated commissions. He often said he would take on jobs that others turned down because of the difficulty of the task.

He was a fixer-upper. If one of the factory machines or the works van went wrong, he was determined to find the problem and solve it himself rather than calling for someone to help. Most times his attempts at fixing the problem were successful, as he liked the challenge and was naturally curious, but perhaps most importantly he didn't like to be defeated. He also relished understanding how something worked, as his father did before him. He was a chip off the old block.

He came across people from all walks of life during his career, and he treated everyone the same. Whether they were from the House of Commons, Westminster Abbey, ambassadors, the doctor in charge of the World Cup football team, or just a local resident, Bob was always himself, and the factory door was always open for business. In recent years, the front of the upholstery business became Fowlds Café, and we'll hear some words from Jack, who started that cafe, in a few moments.

Although he was winding the business down, Bob didn't ever want to retire in the normal sense and cringed if anyone congratulated him on his impending retirement.

He enjoyed the outdoor life and a challenge.

In 1966 he went on the Sir Winston Churchill, a Sail Training Association schooner – a unique sailing experience, including climbing to the top of the mast and taking pictures from the crow's nest.

In 1970 he went on an Outward Bound course in Ardmore in the Scottish Highlands where he enjoyed camping, trekking, mountain climbing and abseiling.

He enjoyed camping and had several holidays in Devon, Scotland, the Lake District, Greece and Yugoslavia (as it was) and even Norway and Sweden although by this time had a little more luxury in a frame tent.

Bob also played squash at Old Dunstonians.

In 1987 he began his love of skiing on a school trip to Aviemore as a helper. While the rest of the party, including half the children, were still struggling to stand upright, Bob was halfway down the mountainside and by the end of the week had progressed to the more difficult runs.

A few years later (1990) he and his friend Dave went to Niederau in Austria and made many friends, progressing onwards to Wengen in the Jungfrau for a more challenging experience. He continued his love of skiing for some 28 years visiting every March.

Life wasn't all play – he gained City & Guilds (NVQ) qualifications in Bookkeeping and Accountancy in later life. He also joined the Freemasons where he rose up the ranks to be Master on several occasions as well as in Chapter.

Bob visited China in 2016, and again in 2017 – with lots of sightseeing and lots of interesting stories to tell when he got home. He enjoyed spending time with Li and his other friends in China.

He was very interested in the Fowlds family history, updating the family tree, tracing 'lost' relatives - and meeting up with them as often as possible.

Bob certainly liked to do things his own way – he didn't like being told what to do. He was very sociable and would often be the last to leave a social event. He had an impressive memory. His favourite pastime was chatting to people about anything and everything and putting the world to

rights – from the Sky at Night to the League of Nations, and latterly to climate change (he even joined Extinction Rebellion). He was argumentative – a Fowlds trait – and questioned everything. He particularly liked talking to and hearing the views of younger people.

This is from John, one of Bob's oldest friends, now in Australia.

"A gentleman and a truly gentle man, never to be hurried. Bob did things in his own time and pace. He was a deep thinker, then he would have another think about it. You probably could not call him a man of action.

"I was proud to have him as my best man all those years ago. I remember his big black Riley car which he worked on from time to time, that sat in his dad's driveway for many years. He was so proud of Barbara's articles and weather pictures on TV. As he said in one of his emails: "So many of her photos have been used it's becoming a bit tedious. I look at the forecast and say not "Barbara in Bromley" again. She has done some really good ones."

His last email said this: "It is what it is, so, just need some luck and keep strength up." Keeping a brave smile - and chatting up all the nurses of course. That's how I'll be remembering him, with a smile on his face and twinkle in his eye."

I will end with a few words from Barbara.

"Bob was the person I always turned to for advice," she says. I always introduced him as my 'big brother' which is very much how I thought of him. He was very protective. He would always help me when I needed his help. He always showed an interest in things I did: my travels abroad, my painting classes, my weather pictures. He was my special brother."

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(POEM READ BY JANET)

Remember Me by Anthony Dowson

Share the happy memories we've made.  
Do not let them wither or fade.  
I'll be with you in the summer's sun  
And when the winter's chill has come.  
I'll be the voice that whispers in the breeze.  
I'm peaceful now, put your mind at ease.  
I've rested my eyes and gone to sleep,  
But memories we've shared are yours to keep.  
Although things may not be the same,  
Don't be afraid to use my name.  
Let your sorrow last for just a while.  
Comfort each other and try to smile.

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As everyone who contributed to the earlier memories recalls, Bob liked being busy at work in Camberwell, and he very much liked socialising with all the people he came into contact with each day. I'll end this section of the ceremony with some words from Bob's friends and neighbours in Addington Square, where he worked for all his adult life.

This is from Joan:

"Bob's workshop always transported me to another world. I could almost hear a grandfather clock ticking as time slowed in there. How did he do it? Maybe the rolls of cloth muffled the outside sounds or the worn surfaces just resonated with patience, skill and a slither of moroseness. I liked that very much.

"Our two small footstools, one of which my feet are resting on now as I type this, were upholstered in brown leather by Bob. They are like loyal patient small dogs lavished with a strip of brass pins. We will miss our special upholsterer. Perhaps we could invent a special aftershave in memory. The Upholsterer. Or maybe it should be a fine dark ale. Or a swatch of cloth."

And this is from Judith and Charlie:

"We have known Bob for the 30 years we have been living in the Square; he has always been a part of our community and we shall really miss him. Our home is a memorial to his upholstery skills – everywhere you look you'll see his work; our sofa alone was re-upholstered at least four times by him! He was never grumpy and always cheery, always chatty. Addington Square won't be the same without him."

And, finally, this tribute from Jack, who set up and runs Fowlds Café in the old shopfront at the workshop. This is his letter to Bob:

Dear Bob, I didn't get to say bye to you. You left us all like you lived your life, quietly and unfussy.

I'm going to miss you Bob.

I'm going to miss your staffing comparisons, your subtle compliments, your take on global issues, your wartime upholstery stories and even your grumbles.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to try out a concept for a pop-up coffee shop in an upholstery. Thank you for letting me have good coffee and bread on my doorstep.

I'll always remember your first reaction when I asked you about opening a cafe in the front of your building.... 'Get in line, every day people come in telling me what they'd like to do with my building.'

So I did. I waited, waited and then gave up waiting after a few months. I asked to convert your old storage shed into a workshop and within two days, you gave me keys. It then only took me a week before you finally caved and agreed to let me open the cafe.

The wacky ideas didn't stop there either. Before you knew it, we had candlelit supper clubs for fifty diners (including in the back of your 1960s Austin furniture van) with guests such as the artist Anish Kapoor and Nick Park of Wallace and Gromit.

Then there was World of Interiors that wrote a 5-page article on a coffee shop and upholstery collaboration in Camberwell.

After six years we've served thousands of thirsty locals and people passing through.

You liked the idea of being in the heart of the community and I don't quite think you knew at the time how much you would be.

By allowing the cafe to happen, you brought an area closer together. We all know you liked a chat. You gave a resident from Kitson Road the opportunity to chat with their neighbour from Camberwell Road. Or the new residents from Arments Court to cross the park and meet their neighbours in Addington Square.

We couldn't have done it without your building and your love for the area.

Stick the kettle on Bob, put the tack hammer down and finally put your feet up. You've earned it.

With love from Jack and all at Fowlds Cafe, past and present staff."

24-Mar-20rev.