

## **John Yerbury 1937 - 2016: eulogy given at his funeral**

I first met John in the autumn of 1961 when we both presented ourselves at Christ's College Cambridge as freshmen. I was very fresh being 18 and just out of school. John was more mature. He had completed a law degree at London University following his education at St Paul's, where he had excelled at Latin and Greek. He had come up to Cambridge to read a post-graduate law degree. I suspect that he was also attracted by the prospect of a good collegiate life at Christ's.

And so we had 3 very privileged years of work, pleasure and sport.

The opportunities for debate, discussion and argument were many and varied, and we were spoilt for choice. John joined the Union and the Cambridge University Conservative Association. He dabbled in politics from the side lines, leaving it to others to seek office in the Association. And there were many such others, later to become cabinet ministers, who were then forging their political careers and were anxious to be noticed and given positions in the Association. Instead, John devoted his energies to the University Law Society, where he became Vice-President in his last year. This was a position eminently suited to him. It involved arranging the lectures by visiting judges and lawyers, and most importantly entertaining them to dinner after their talks. At this time Cambridge was an Assize Town and each term a High Court Judge would come on circuit to "clear the jails". I have little doubt that John greatly enjoyed his year of office.

One of John's chums at Christs was Derry Irvine, who in later years was to become Lord Chancellor in Tony Blair's first government. He had also come up to Cambridge to do post graduate studies in law, having read a first degree at Glasgow. Derry was a strong Labour supporter and I remember the intense discussions about political and constitutional issues which, lubricated with drink, would go on into the night!

John and Derry, with the enthusiasm of youth, decided to write a book together. It was to be the definitive biography of all English and Scottish judges since records began. I forget the details but they started off by writing the biographies of some of the more interesting judges. I expect that they started at the beginning of the alphabet with the likes of Lord Atkin and Lord Birkenhead. However, they had totally underestimated the magnitude of the task, and the venture had to be shelved when they left Cambridge and went out to earn their livings.

John introduced me to horse-racing at Newmarket. Everything had to be done with military precision. I would have been quite happy to lean against a railing and cheer a horse on, but John insisted that I follow the procedure. First we had to walk the course and pronounce on the going. Then we had to make our way to the owners' ring to check whether any horses were limping. Next to the bookies and then to join a queue at the tote. Finally, off to a good vantage point. And then we would do this all over again for the next 5 races! If we had had electronic pedometers in those days (like the Fitbits that all the young wear today) I think we would have found that we had walked half a marathon.

John also enjoyed the good things of life at Cambridge. In his second year he occupied one of the best rooms in the College. I do not know how he managed to obtain it. It was in First Court overlooking the circular lawn, next to the Chapel and the Master's Lodge. From his window he looked out onto the famous wisteria which adorned the Master's Lodge. I have happy memories of a dinner party which he gave in this room before we all went off to the College's May Ball. It was a splendid occasion. There weren't many girls at Cambridge in those days but somehow a bevy of debutantes had been enticed to join us!

After Cambridge John started work as a solicitor. He was a specialist in trust law and pension matters and after a spell at Freshfields he became a partner in Jacques and Lewis which had offices in Gray's Inn. He married Anne in August 1968 at All Saints Marlow, and they moved into their first home at 6 Church Street just a hundred yards away from here. Their daughter Patricia was born in 1972, and christened here at St. Nicholas. Anne was a community nurse and my wife Denise and I had many happy evenings in their home. I can never drive round the Hogarth roundabout without thinking of John and Anne. A few years later they moved to 43 Spencer Road.

Sadly Anne died in 1988. She was far too young. Tricia was 15 at the time and John and Tricia courageously faced the future together. John was extremely proud of Tricia's achievements. After her education at Westonbirt she went to Aston University and qualified as a pharmacist. She became the lead pharmacist for cardiovascular medicine at Kings College Hospital.

At a later stage in his professional career John was encouraged to join the National Coal Board to assist in the administration of their complex pension schemes. This work required him to travel to the mining areas of the country and gave him the opportunity to visit racecourses which he would not otherwise have frequented. This may explain his proud boast that he had visited every race course in the country apart from two!

John was a regular church-goer. At Cambridge he was a loyal supporter of the College Chapel and he was always ready to attend the University Church, Great St. Mary's, to hear a good sermon. [As you have heard from Father Simon] John was church warden at St. Nicholas for many years. He was for a long period Chairman of the Trustees of Whittingham Court, a local alms house. He was Godfather to my daughter Alexandra Harkins, and also to Katie Richards.

As I look back on John's life I am struck by the depth of his knowledge and interests. He had an inquisitiveness which encompassed such fields as the arts, culture, horticulture and even ornithology. Tricia and Simon's wedding in Italy was a very happy occasion. At one point when John was being driven in a car through the Tuscan countryside a bird flew across their path. To the amusement and surprise of the occupants John exclaimed "Oh look! That's a Hoopoe bird". He was undoubtedly correct in his recognition of this relatively uncommon, but distinctive, bird normally only seen in warmer climes. Tricia and Simon will forever remember John as a loving father and father in law whose mind and quest for knowledge remained active to the end.

He was a true friend and he will be sorely missed.

Michael Harvey QC