

David Reginald Trelawney Wickham
Eulogy

I should begin by saying that if David Wickham were on his feet just now he would not know where to put himself. He would be humbled and not a little daunted, but so chuffed and thankful, as we are, that so many of you have come to say farewell to him.

89 years is a long time. We have been clearing a lot of papers in the last week or two. One of them is a Curriculum Vitae of sorts. It helps summarise a long and eventful life:

David was born in Uganda where his father was in the Colonial Service. He was educated at Marlborough and New College, Oxford, where he read Physics, having done his National Service in Palestine.

On leaving University he joined the Bombay Company, an old established East India Merchant Company. He came back to England after 6 years, got married, joined a computer company and bought a small farm in Sussex. They had one son by the marriage, who now works in publishing [by the skin of his teeth], but were divorced after 7 years.

Three years later he married again and bought a farm with a lovely 700-year-old farmhouse in Somerset, where he has his roots. By this marriage they have one son and two daughters [my better halves]. Although now divorced, he remains on friendly terms with his former wife.

David's interests include travel to interesting places (he is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society), skiing, archaeology, music and the arts. At present he is busy planning to plant up to 23 acres of his farm with trees in as decorative a way as allowed by the Forestry Commission and also planning to extend his garden.

[You might have guessed by now that this is not a job-seeker's CV]

He is hoping to meet an adventurous tolerant lady with at least some similar interests. He is six foot tall and although somewhat tatterdemalion in appearance will don a dinner jacket or tails should occasion demand.

So to put some flesh on these bones...

David spent his early childhood in Somerset but was sent to a school in Château-d'Œx, Switzerland, for his apparently delicate health. There he learned French and very fortunately for us, his children, learned to ski - and loved it.

While in Switzerland and when he was just 8 years old, his own father died tragically in a car accident in Uganda. He returned to the Quantocks where his mother lived in what must have been genteel poverty at Keeper's Combe, Over Stowey, a remote idyllic retreat one mile from the nearest road. He made some lifelong friends here and, as so many people who live there, knew and loved those hills with a passion.

With nothing but a Colonial Service pension, his mother researched and enabled him to win a bursary to Marlborough College from the Rajah of Sarawak - or his philanthropic Foundation which supported education for promising but disadvantaged young students. His powerful intellect made him a good student and a few more lifelong friends.

On leaving school at the end of the war he chose the Palestine Police for his National Service. This had a huge impact on him and for the rest of his life he maintained a passionate interest and active involvement in demanding the recognition of a sovereign independent state of Palestine. He joined Caabu, the Council for Arab-British Understanding, attracted by

its mission to work for a British Middle East policy that promoted conflict resolution, human rights and civil society in the Arab world. He wrote letters to the *Times*, slept on floors - often mine - to attend meetings and/or debates in the House of Commons. For all we know he may even have been a member of the PLO. Just 5 years ago he went out to Ramallah and the West Bank chaperoned by one of his Quaker friends.

On his return from Palestine he was persuaded by his brother Anthony and bluestocking Aunt Margaret to apply for Oxford. New College and its famous choir were founded by his ancestor William of Wykeham. There he read Physics, attended the Choir, as well as many gaudies then and since, gained more friends and a not terribly good degree. It was at New College that he also bought the first of innumerable inexpensive cars.

A notice on a board at New College drew him to the Bombay Company. And this is where I should hand over to his friend Peter Parsons.

Thank you, Peter, etc

I hope you are sitting comfortably as we have 60-plus years to go
So after all that time in India he married the girl he knew from the Quantocks, Adèle D'Aubuz. Marriage to my mother was followed by a brief spell teaching Maths at Radley, and I think chess, where he would play simultaneous games with half a dozen or more opponents at a time. He would later teach chess to us his children, normally handicapping himself by playing without a queen or other important pieces. But of course he always won. They lived near Richmond. One of the inexpensive cars at this time was a Rolls Royce with red Rs and no brakes. (For the benefit of the young the red Rs were there before the death of Royce in 1933 when they subsequently became black). It was probably the only car he ever had that was stolen, despite so often leaving the keys in the ignition.

Sussex

They rented a C16th Ironmaster's house called Glaziers Forge, in Dallington, East Sussex, once used for making cannons and cannon balls. Again, it was more than a mile from the nearest road and my mother washed our clothes in the river. Then came the small, beautiful farm. This was a dilapidated oast house in Kipling country just a couple of miles from Bodiam Castle. The oasts had rotted and fallen in and he set about restoration with a whole lot of students from Oxford. (Project-managed would be the wrong description). He found and installed a Lutyens stair-case. We had a milk cow, some red Sussex cattle, an old Land-Rover, my mother's thoroughbred eventers, and a pony and trap, and in summer you could smell all the hops in the surrounding fields which would have originally gone into the oasts. When it snowed (and in 1963 this was way above my head) my father gave me my first taste of skiing – standing between his knees.

London

In-between times David was buying and repairing houses in London. Like the cars these were inexpensive, just £2k apiece, but would of course nowadays be worth millions. He was also joining, and even hoping to establish, a gliding club. He did well out of the properties and cleverly converted the proceeds into other long-term investments, being fortunate eventually not to be one of the Lloyds Names who lost their shirts.

At about this time he discovered the ancient and fiendishly complex game of Go. This is probably the world's most cerebral board game with infinite move possibilities. It made the headlines earlier this year because an artificial intelligence programme has recently perfected complete mastery over human champions. The reason it made the headlines – and would have been of huge interest to David - is that this has important ramifications for the development of artificial intelligence, and China's response to the match has been to keep silent about it rather

than reveal the ruling Party's technology ambitions.

He played with his brother Anthony and local friends as well as in national tournaments. He went annually to the London tournament at New Year as well as travelling to Dublin, Stockholm and Amsterdam with not much more than a sleeping bag and toothbrush. As with croquet, that other remarkably cerebral game - though requiring rather smarter attire - he would normally report the same results – lost a couple, won a couple. He and his brother entered local tournaments and David would make an annual pilgrimage to the Hurlingham Club in London, returning in his whites with all the commuters to stay with one of us who now lived there. He even made himself a little belfry in the rafters of the house which Rex and Sarah shared in order to have a pied-a-terre he could call his own.

He briefly had a job with ICL the British computer giant. This began another life-long interest in artificial intelligence. By this time he had met Hilary, young enough to be my sister (as of course she is still!). They had acquired an elegant old yawl called Kotick. (This was also doubtless inexpensive and certainly had more leaks than any of the cars). It was built in 1913 and David and Hilary sailed it all the way from the Thames estuary to Brixham harbour. After a storm off the IoW they limped in to Cowes of all places with a broken mast, looking for all the world as if they'd just circumnavigated it non-stop.

Back to Somerset

After a summer of shopping for affordable farms in the west country, David bought what was marketed as 'a healthy and productive sheep farm' in 1969 for the princely sum of £9k. This was no ordinary farm. Trowell had been farmed since 1327 and not much had changed. It was remote and though not as much as a mile from the nearest road, what the lane lacked in length it made up for in gradient. It was an unmetalled 1 in 4 track so steep that most visitors left their cars and walked up. It was not possible to drive around the two hairpin bends in one go – going either up or down you had to reverse to be able to make the second bend. No lorry could get up the hill but for one exception which we may come to in a minute. Everything except the house slid downhill. All too often it was all too much - for the jalopies that collected in a glacier of junk that Steptoe & Son would envy.

The house was a gem: it had belonged to Muchelney Abbey from the 12th century until 1538. It boasted hip crucks, moulded ceilings, a curing chamber and a circular corn drying kiln and best of all, the finest C15th linenfold panelling, the only known example in a Somerset farmhouse.

Water came from a well – which to my delight had frogs. Water had originally been diverted to the fields via leets from a pond below the house. Mr Hendy tapped a spring and created a reservoir at the top of the farm to supply the house and the farm's very first water troughs. Rather impressively to a 9-year-old, his bulldozer tipped over thanks to the gradient and of course it was David Wickham who worked out how best to get it back up on its tracks with pulleys and levers. There was also a cider house, and cider orchards, from which we made over a 100 gallons of cider every September with the help of local friends, one just yards from this church, who knew how to cut the straw with scythes and lay the layers of apple pulp. It normally lasted until the end of the summer.

In winter we froze. The bathroom was effectively outside, beyond the boot-room. Heating was from the Rayburn in the kitchen and from the huge dining room fireplace. Frequently we parked the car at the bottom of the hill and walked up over the ice that invariably covered the drive.

Farming was not something my father had ever learned over the breakfast table. But he worked hard and was meticulous with running costs, valuations of winter feed, soil tests, plans to widen the hairpin bends, sales and purchases of tractor and transport box, sheep,

cows, and later Lord Cherwell, the enormous South Devon bull. This Exercise book [to hand] chronicles these as well as some idler moments – of which there would have bound to have been quite a few – discussing, for example, the Accretion and Dispersal of Matter in the Early Universe and proposing ‘a fairly simple computer program that might (just might) contribute to understanding the phenomenon’.

David’s bedtime reading was what you might call the improving kind. As well as being invariably curious about the world in daylight hours, he was an insomniac and read widely on favourite topics and big subjects – archaeology, classical history, architecture, cosmology, artificial intelligence, robotics, biochemistry, evolution and the brain. He was excited by Michael Behe’s recent theories of irreducible complexity and intelligent design. These challenge natural selection and argue, with biochemical evidence, the case for an intelligent designer, or a divine creator. Since we’re in church, let’s call him God. What a wonderful conversation he might enjoy with William Blake!

He shared this enthusiasm with Miriam, a school-leaver from Marlborough, who had first telephoned him as a fund-raiser little knowing that their subsequent correspondence - which we found just last week - would blossom into a real pen-pal friendship while she studied medicine at Edinburgh. Dr Miriam Manook is now a leading young organ-transplant specialist.

Inventions

One of David’s many inventions was to create a woodburning stove which was fed and lit from outside in order to prevent the draughts. It worked rather well and looked terrific but it was an art to light as you had to use a long pole like a pizza oven chef’s. It eventually failed because we all got headaches from carbon monoxide poisoning. The outside woodburning CH and HW system was finally perfected when David bought a jacketed burner which looked like a steam engine without the wheels. It consumed huge piles of wood. He would cut outgrown ash trees from the hedges with a chainsaw and load on to the tractor and trailer. Even then he was in his early 80s and barely had enough strength or weight to apply the brake effectively. A bit of string attached to a coiled spring regulated the air intake and temperature. Pure Heath Robinson. And a bit of Steptoe thrown in of course.

Other improvements came – cow kennels, a silage pit, the secret passage and an inside bathroom that opened up a view to the north, and of this church. It must have been a success because it was quickly followed by another immediately beside it, presumably in case the first was occupied and there was still sufficient hot water.

I am trying to avoid anecdote or we will be here all night. But while on the subject of inventions I should mention the robot. This David had purloined from one of Rex’s toys in order to light the candles on a Christmas cake. Like his autogyro it never got off the ground and only failed because he forgot to make allowance for a candle that had gone out and so it burnt its little plastic wrist on one that was already alight. On the subject of burning we can now return to the one lorry that made it up the hill. One evening Hilary found the kitchen ablaze. Neighbours the Martins happened to spot the tongue of flame that spouted from the chimney like a Roman Candle and kindly helped put it out with a human chain. Astonishingly, the fire engine arrived to soak the thatch within 15 minutes of the call – all thanks to one of the crew, close to retirement, who had remembered practice drills to the most inaccessible house in Somerset.

Then came a relatively simple invention that David claimed his best and has used for as long as most of us can remember. This was the belt and belly bag that now replaced the baler twine that kept his trousers up. It contained diary, wallet, address and cheque-book, pens. Adopting the principle of stringing children’s mittens, another strand went round again, subdividing to anchor on pieces of button thread glasses, hearing aids, keys, and even a neatly drilled credit

card. He claimed that it saved him hours of fruitless searching. Unfurled it stretched out in a festoon of about 10 feet – but all had to go back on again in the right order. In airports and ski resorts it caused complete – and from this distance, sublime - chaos. It went everywhere with him, travelling as far afield as India, to Thailand with Tasha, and to Japan, to stay with Sarah.

An eligible man

Hilary had toughed this out for a very long time and knew it could only go on so long. She made a gracious exit to Wiveliscombe, which David in time came to accept with his own good grace. They remained excellent friends and Hilary has been a brick, if not a complete keystone, since our father once again became a bachelor of hazy eligibility. She was as amused - and amazed - as the rest of us by the torrent of interest from his advertisements in the Personal columns. They read well and sounded better: my father's speaking voice likened by my mother-in-law to that of the incomparable John Gielgud. He had another super gift; a delighted, musical laugh that occasionally bubbled out of his highly developed sense of the absurd. When something really tickled him he would give way to it with abandon. Once begun it seemed to fuel itself and always made the actual joke even funnier.

The 'adventurous tolerant' ladies would first recognise David in cafes in Sloane Square by his unmistakable, trademark Sherlock Holmes cape. Those who dared would then arrive in cashmeres and unconvincingly shiny cars to see how this diffident gentleman farmer fared at home. They were nice and tried hard, and some of them stuck it out, making excellent travelling companions to interesting and exotic destinations such as Jordan and Morocco, and became genuine friends. One of them even succeeded in persuading David to instal a new kitchen.

Nynehead

One day, on a rare visit to the tip outside Wellington my father drew up outside Nynehead Court. He announced that this was where he might like to retire some time in the future. It seemed improbably smart and not quite his style. He made mention of his failing memory as if this was a new thing. We all thought we knew better. For as long as we could remember we had all seen him patting pockets, losing wallet and passport, hunting for downed tools, putting on other people's shoes, skis, hats, coats, even driving off with someone else's car – *and dog!*

But, as we have only recently discovered, this was the beginning of the dementia that he had anticipated. He sold the llamas that had for so long made light of hills and hedges, put the farm on the market and bought a small but well-designed converted outhouse for independent gracious living. As a sop to being landless he bought a beautiful wood near Bathealton and repaired there with the old tractor and a caravan - and some precious junk. Inevitably, more clapped-out cars breathed their last at this lovely spot. He read more books about the human brain, and without breathing a word to any of us, proceeded to accept without apparent fear or self-pity what would turn out to be the tournament he knew he could not win.

Thanks to publicity and TV appeals we all know a bit more today about dementia, Alzheimers and associated degeneration of the brain. But it is really only now that we his family have come to realise how magnificently David coped with such a cruel adversary. He continued to play bridge, croquet, read the *Economist*, got himself to Palestine - predictably disdaining travel insurance. Just last year he even went skiing with his crazy daughters!

The first real blow, equivalent to losing his queen in this long game, was the enforced loss of his driving licence. His counter-move was an electric bicycle with which he could happily swoosh to Taunton, Wellington, Wiveliscombe and his wood - and keep the staff at Nynehead on permanent alert. After falling off a couple of times, most people might have expected him to call it a day. Nothing daunted, he just added a wheel and transferred to an electric tricycle. This helped prolong his independence to the last: he joined the local croquet club, intercepted

the bus into Taunton, and set the locals' tongues wagging for leaving it, complete with Scamp the dog on her homemade pillion seat, outside a pub in Wellington while he had lunch. He was riding it just last month.

It is only in sorting through his things and papers and talking with the family about all the scrapes and escapades, that it struck me how like Don Quixote's David's long and picaresque life has been. If there is one word that can describe him then quixotic is surely it. Like 'tatterdemalion' it is not a word we use much these days, so I checked the thesaurus just to make sure:

Quixotic
synonyms

idealistic, unbusinesslike, romantic, extravagant, visionary, utopian, unrealistic, unworldly; impracticable, unworkable, impossible, ineffective, useless, inefficacious; chivalrous, impetuous, benevolent, courteous, high-minded, absurd, harebrained, beguiling; introspective, mercurial, brave, out-of-reach, exasperating, magnanimous, charming...

What a character! What a man. And - what a wonderful gift of a father and grandfather.