

Remembering Christopher West

Christopher West (Wilson 1937-40) died on March 28, 2010.

This eulogy by one of his sons, Michael, was given at his funeral.

Good afternoon and thank you for coming to this service for my father, Chris West. My brothers Peter and Anthony and I have pieced together these recollections about our father, adding in thoughts from friends and family passed on in the numerous emails we have received since his passing.

Dad was always an avid player of sports and games, which is a love he passed on to my brothers and I. As a young boy I remember walking down our street in Woodbridge to the Fen Meadow with Dad and a lawn mower singing "One man went to mow, went to mow a meadow", to create a cricket pitch for practising our batting and bowling. Peter's first really clear memory of Dad was playing the three Billy Goats Gruff, with him hiding in the stairwell of our house in Seckford Street trying to catch us as we crossed over the bridge. How exciting and thrilling it was to try and get by him. Peter reminded me of the endless walks we went on as children. The river wall loop in Woodbridge, the hills in the Lake District, the Cobb and cliffs in Lyme Regis. Mum and Dad ushering the three of us as we explored our surroundings, kicking puffballs, and pushing leaves along with sticks in the autumn. Peter admits, and I am sure that Ant and I agree, that he didn't always love these often cold and damp outings, but now finds them the foundation of the major loves in his life, walking and sailing!

Dad was a keen golfer. He played at the

Penang Golf and Country Club while in Malaya. He taught Ant and I at the Bonshaw par three golf course in PEI on our summer holidays. We spent happy hours with him at the Airlines golf course near Halifax Airport, hitting balls into the woods and blaming the noise of the airplanes on our lack of success. What we lost in the woods we usually fished out of the water hazard at the seventh hole. We weren't above a little paddling to save a buck or two. Eventually the course management caught on and deepened the hazard, but we resisted the temptation to bring our swimming trunks. Dad loved sports but he was never aggressively competitive. You never felt you were in competition with him but you knew that he wanted you to try your best. It wasn't about beating someone else, just getting the maximum fun and exercise out of what you were doing.

In his seventies Dad was a keen runner. He put in many miles circling the Dalplex track, getting a sore hip on his inside leg until he started to alternate his direction. Notably he broke his hip after he was chased by a pack of wild dogs while jogging before dawn in Guyana. He continued to exercise for as long as possible. Even in November of last year he would still take his daily constitutional with Sally, the dog, on the Gorsebrook Field, pushing his walker up impossibly steep hills. He had lots of admirers who wondered at his resilience despite a >

debilitating illness. When Wellington Street was repaved recently, the workmen, seeing his daily excursion, paved an extra few feet to help him on his way to the field.

Dad was a legend at repairing things, not just ships. He could return almost anything to working order as long as you didn't mind what it looked like afterwards. His signature materials were green string, epoxy glue, coat hangers and, in later years as a nod to his adopted country, duct tape. Dad had a simple, cheap and practical way of fixing anything. Recently John Swaine told me that Dad was responsible for overseeing the bending of the brass altar rail here at Saint Georges, a task that had stumped others. For Peter, in addition to repairing things, Dad was his inspiration for making things. There were many school projects and competitions in which he definitely scored higher than he would have without Dad's help. Pete still has his Roman ballista which can throw a marble 15 feet, and there was a submarine that could dive, travel underwater and then surface, made from wood, tin cans, concrete and elastic bands. Amazing!

Something that was very important to Dad was his family. We knew where he came from, that his father was a great doctor, and that so to were his two brothers: Michael and Philip. From a very young age, we were aware of the importance of Dad's brothers to him, and we knew how fond he was of his nieces. The feeling seems to have been mutual, as our cousins all have lovely stories of Uncle Chris, and his habit of showing up from exotic locations with wonderful gifts. Philip's daughter Jane still has a camel he brought her from Egypt. Michael's daughter Sally remembers him giving her a wood burning kit – who ever gives a nine-year-

old child an electric tool that could burn wood? My aunt Miggie reminded me in an email of how generous and tolerant Dad was. In the late 60s, after her first marriage had broken up, she came to stay with my parents in New Brunswick to recover. She recalled how Dad had opened his house to her and her two daughters Emma and Annabelle. With us boys, there were five kids under the age of five in the house. Generosity indeed!

Another characteristic of Dad that has by times frustrated and amused his family was his quiet nature. At Dad's 80th birthday his brother Michael told this story of him as a child. Uncle Michael remembered coming from Canterbury in an open tourer Clyno car and passing by Manston aerodrome. His mother said: "Look, Christopher, here is where the airplanes go bye-byes." Christopher, who had hardly spoken a word all his life (quite a worry for his parents), said, "Do you mean aerodrome?" He only talked when he had something useful to say.

His grandchildren wanted me to say that they liked his ghost stories, which were wonderfully gory and inappropriate, and that they enjoyed their games of bagatelle with him on Saturday mornings.

Ant was struck that Dad was old-fashioned and ahead of his time, all at the same time. By his recollection, Dad cooked precisely one meal in his life, which was Nasi Goreng (a delicacy from his days in Malaya). On the other hand, Dad had a thoroughly modern sensibility, always encouraging our mother to work and to be her own person. (As if he had any option!) No-one was prouder of her achievements (like her two honorary doctorates) than Dad. In this building, I think everyone will sympathise, but we must admit that Dad >

wasn't perfect. He did grumble just a little bit after about 4½ years of the five-year Saint George's Restoration project!

Mum and Dad's marriage of 44 years is an inspiration to my brothers and I. Theirs was a wonderful and adventurous partnership, founded on respect for each other, and love. In this, Dad taught us how to be gentle men. Thankfully, it was Mum who taught us how to cook!

Peter mentions Dad's deep belief in education, which was one of his greatest gifts to us. He admits to having been frustrated by Dad's insistence that he understand the nitty-gritty of algebraic equations. Now, deep into his practice of medicine he finally admits that understanding something all the way to the bottom is essential.

No remembrance of our father is complete without a mention of his vocation and his profession. From his earliest days, Dad was interested in ships and the sea. At 17 he became a naval cadet, and by 23 had fought with, and then left, the Royal

Navy. Dad's war years aboard ships and submarines certainly must have been challenging and exciting, but like many, he preferred to remember the fun times and the camaraderie, not the hardships. Starting in Newcastle upon Tyne, in Malaya, Montreal, Scotland, St. John NB, Woodbridge, England, Marystown in Newfoundland, and finally in Halifax, Dad had a long career in naval architecture and shipbuilding. If you did want to get him talking, shipbuilding, or anything to do with sheet metal for that matter, was the perfect subject. In his seventies, Dad was still going at it, volunteering with an organisation which sent him around the world, sharing his lifetime of experience.

In the last few years, Dad struggled with Parkinson's Disease. Thankfully, he's finished with all that now. At his request, his ashes will soon be scattered at sea, and he'll finally be able to get back to the nautical life and to his beloved sports. Dad, we'll miss you.
