

CHRISTOPHER

Little Houghton
Friday 16 January 2015

We are gathered this afternoon to honour a man of whom individually, I suspect, we may know rather little. We come from all walks of life, and may have known him from one of the many institutions and organizations with which he was connected, sometimes two, rarely more. Or maybe we come because we knew him in this village as the man from the big house, even – and the best reason – because we want to be here. But beyond our own field of interest, our own connection with him, we doubtfully know too much of what he did during his lifetime. And we must be careful in our use of the word ‘honour’ because our friend Christopher was the last person ever to look for, or expect, recognition - place - for what he did.

So what *do* we know about Christopher Guy Vere Davidge – Christopher, a very old family name, Guy because he was born on Guy Fawkes’ Day and Vere, taking his father’s Christian name. But to most of us simply Christopher.

He was born at the family home here in Little Houghton eighty-five years ago, and three years later was joined by sister Anne, the two children of Catherine and Vere Davidge. His first school was Maidwell; he then went to Eton before going up to Trinity College, Oxford, to study law.

It was whilst he was at Eton that he first took an interest in rowing, the sport that was to become a life-long passion and commitment, and before the age of eighteen he had made his first appearance on the river at Henley. What has been described as ‘a formidable career’ had begun. We can do no more this afternoon than to take a brief glimpse of it, but happily it is well documented, and will be spoken of again at the Thanksgiving Service in Henley later on.

But a little time must be given to noting some of Christopher's quite remarkable rowing achievements. He stroked the Oxford ~~team~~^{Eight} in the boat race on three occasions; 1949, 1951 and 1952, in '51 earning the doubtful and probably incorrect privilege of sinking the boat, but that incident merely enhanced his reputation, providing endless conversation for dinner-parties ever after, and in an instant secured the lasting loyalty of this village for Oxford. No less than three times an Olympian, his retirement as an athlete gave him new opportunity in different ways to support the sport that he loved. He headed up the GB team to the Olympic Games in Montreal in 1976, and was involved in diplomatic discussions and incidents about several others, when his natural ability to calm a difficult situation was sought on more than one occasion. But beyond the demands and sometimes the glamour of the international scene he maintained his near-lifetime connection with Henley and its Regatta, serving its cause in many ways and in high office, and its annual gathering had an unmoveable entry in his diary. A formidable career indeed, both nationally and internationally, and one for which all of us who knew him, rowers or no, can share justifiable pleasure.

Beyond the rowing world, Christopher had an active business life. For almost twenty years he was a Director and then Managing Director of Mixconcrete – at the time one of the major gravel extraction and concrete manufacturing companies in the country - and numbered directorships of various private companies among his interests. An active underwriting member of Lloyds and member of its Council, and Director and Chairman of Lloyd's of London Press formed a large part of his business life and I know from first-hand comment I have heard that in the City his judgment was often sought, valued and respected.

We move on, because his work for his native County was as unique, unequalled, as that of any of his interests. Not from any position of privilege did he become one of its leading figures in the last quarter of the twentieth century – sheer hard work and commitment brought him to that.

He was a Governor and then Chairman of St Andrew's Hospital one of the leading psychiatric hospitals in the country, and upon his retirement from office continued a lively interest as a Vice-President; in 1981 he co-founded with the late Sir John Lowther the Three Shires Hospital, a private hospital in Northampton and served as Chairman of the trustees for the next twenty-five years; he was a long-time Governor and Chairman of his old school, Maidwell; a Trustee and later Chairman of the trust of the Northampton University; and was President of the Northamptonshire Branch of the British Red Cross for three years. In 1981 when his father died he was persuaded to inherit the Chairmanship of the Northamptonshire Record Society – one of the leading Record Societies in the country – where his wisdom and foresight not only secured a sound financial base for the Society but also saw the publication of many fine volumes about the history of Northamptonshire and the ancient Soke of Peterborough. That appointment led to his natural support for the formation of Northamptonshire Victoria County History which is committed to overseeing the publication of further volumes about different aspects of County life, and he was recently re-elected its Vice-Chairman. He was also Chairman of the River Nene Regional Park Community which promotes the cultural and natural assets and resources of the Nene Valley.

A man dedicated to the welfare and well-being of Northamptonshire and its people, and with a clear vision for its continuing 'place' in the rich and ever-evolving history of this country.

But let us now turn for a moment to the local scene – to this village and the surrounding countryside. He managed the Little Houghton Estate – which stretches from the edge of Northampton just down the road to the boundary of Brafield with Denton some two miles or more the other way. He worked tirelessly to preserve and enhance the environment and character of the village and it is to no small extent due to his efforts that the area was not swallowed-up by urban development when in the early nineteen-seventies the Government decreed that the town should become an overspill area for

London. Time after time he refused to have anything to do with speculative builders or lucrative-sounding offers for parcels of land, and more recently was active in helping to resist a proposal to build up to eighteen thousand new homes in the area. Over these last weeks, I have heard a number of people –several of whom I could not have imagined - express concern, anxiety, about the future of this village; it must be hoped that the Estate trustees, and our Parish Council, will stand firm against undesirable future planning proposals, as did Christopher.

In addition to all this, other day-to-day work continued. He was a landlord of the old order; if one of his tenants hit upon hard times, a little talk would usually resolve a problem, invariably to the tenant's advantage. As one of them, I venture to suggest that none of his tenants – and many are here today - would have changed their landlord for another.

He was a Governor of the village School, following generations of his family in that office, but the appointment he most treasured was probably that of Patron of the Living of the parishes of Little Houghton and Brafield on the Green. Here, he took his duties with the utmost seriousness, on more than one occasion demonstrating the value of having a resident private Patron when it comes to appointing a new Vicar, rather than being dependent for support and advice on an *ad hoc* representative of some distant college foundation or diocesan board.

Enough indeed to fill a long life, and that Christopher did to the full. Honours did come upon him; he was rightly proud of them, but he wore them lightly, without any outward show. The catalogue of his Henley awards and medals is almost legendary, and in 1982 he was appointed an Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for services to sport, and to rowing in particular. In the same year he was made a Freeman of the Company of Watermen and Lightermen of the River Thames. In 1988 he became High Sheriff of Northamptonshire, as was his father before him, and soon afterwards a Deputy Lieutenant for the County, and twelve years ago was invited to become an Honorary Fellow of the University of Northampton.

Of his many qualities it was perhaps his willingness to listen, and if invited – or he thought it desirable – unhesitatingly to give the benefit of his advice, and few – one could, I suspect, say no one, was turned away from his door disappointed. True, at times he could give the impression of being a little inflexible, unyielding, and he was obstinate – a Davidge family trait – but it was generally short-lived. The secret was to persuade him to sleep on a difference of opinion, and one would stand a pretty good chance of winning in the morning. Resolving a problem usually worked if one met him head-on. Occasionally of course one could be genteelly re-buffed; in which case it was best to suggest a little whisky, which would be served with warmth and pleasure.

In other words be reasonable and fair, and Christopher would be reasonable and fair in return.

He had a keen, if usually controlled, sense of humour; on more than one occasion I have suffered from his twinkling eye during a heavy and tedious debate or a dull and lengthy sermon. He loved parties. Nothing gave him more pleasure than to fill his house and garden with people. That he did on many occasions, always with gracious ease and generosity; only days before he was taken ill, he and Jill hosted the Village Fete - an event which gave them both as much pleasure as it did those who came. Some of his happiest times were entertaining his friends during the Henley Regatta, as he did only last Season. Another highlight in the calendar was the meet of the Oakley Hounds in front of the house on Christmas Eve.

One could doubtfully find words enough fully to describe the true character of our friend Christopher, but if I were asked for one that encapsulated his life, it would be *service*. Service to the wide Society, service to his own County, service to all with whom he came into contact. He *knew* the meaning of that word – and tried to practice it.

I have been fortunate. Over the last few years, since our respective lives became a little less entangled in charitable interests (or maybe we only thought they had) Christopher and I have found opportunity for quiet times together, often talking about very little; sometimes, not at all. But I came more and more to realize that, beyond the fullness of his life, he was at heart the village boy born and bred; he loved this place as none other; he belonged here.

And the long months when he was in hospital gave us yet better opportunity to share that mutual feeling.

Now it is time to take our farewell. How do we do that? It is all here in the Service sheet. We could murmur our dutiful 'Amen' in the right place. But surely, it is not like that.

If our presence here this afternoon is worth anything, more is needed of us. We have three tasks before us.

Firstly, we express our gratitude to Christopher for all that he did, for all that he was, and for all that he meant to us. But our gratitude brings with it both challenge and opportunity. The challenge is to try to continue, in our own lives and as best we can, the work that he started; the opportunity will daily come upon us.

Secondly, to give our continuing – continuing - support to Jill. Until now that has been fairly easy, but the weeks and months ahead will be when she needs it most.

And lastly, to commit Christopher's soul to his Maker. That is something better left to Parson, we might feel. But again, it is not like that; we all need to be part of such a solemn act. On occasion such as this, I find the Book of old Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, helpful. May I quote now words from the last chapter, and the seventh verse.... *Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God, who gave it.*

Not hard to follow, but I rather like the way in which an old much-loved and respected inhabitant of this place put it shortly before he died a few years ago 'the soul will go back to the man who owns it.' I think of that now because one evening just before he died, I was living in the past with Christopher, and we were happily recalling some of the sayings of our old friend Jack.

Those words stand at the heart of my Faith, and give me the peace, the confidence – and the hope that I know I need in my own life. May I invite you to take them away with you this afternoon, and I believe that in good heart our thanksgiving for Christopher's life will be complete:

The spirit shall return unto God, who gave it.

Farewell now, Christopher, dear friend: Fare thee well. And may God for ever keep you in His love.