

GERALD PRICE – 1927-2020

1. Introduction

I would just like to begin by thanking everyone here for attending in these difficult times. The effort taken is greatly appreciated. I would also like to welcome those watching remotely; and everyone for the many wonderful messages of condolence I have received.

I will now try to say something about my father's life.

2. Early life

He was born in Sidaway Street, Old Hill in September 1927. He was the second of five brothers born to Tom and Elizabeth Price. Soon the growing family moved a mile or so to 139 Bars Road, opposite the ground of the Old Hill Cricket Club and Haden Hill Park. The Club and the park were to be central to his youth, places of wonder and joy, providing memories which remained with him for the rest of his life. Just a few years ago we played a fleeting visit to the cricket ground which left him feeling wistful. You see, he explained, this place is full of ghosts. Ghosts of a happy childhood, not prosperous on the sense we would understand today, but filled with love and fun.

These years provided many influences and allegiances which were to stay for life. Wolverhampton Wanderers was one which provided an occasional source of pleasure and a more frequent source of disappointment. Another was Worcestershire County Cricket Club where he eventually became a life member. He also discovered his very fine voice, both as a singer and impersonator – his public performances of his impression of Winston Churchill became very famous – more like Churchill than Churchill they said.

Above all he developed a deep commitment to the Christian Faith, centred on Old Hill Catholic Church - something which was to run like a golden thread through his life.

He finished his schooling at Dudley College of Technology but did not particularly excel in the academic world – his qualifications when he left formal education were few.

3. In the Navy

Soon after leaving school, towards the end of the war, he signed up for National Service, joining the Royal Navy. Unfortunately, he was not aware at the time that he suffered from a chronic propensity to seasickness. For this reason, he told me once, joining the Navy was the most stupid decision he had ever taken in his life. Nevertheless, he did get to see many places – Malta, Gibraltar, Venice, Rome, Trieste and Haifa. He also began to find his feet in terms of his abilities, showing a propensity for administration and been put in charge of the ship's stores.

4. Work and family

Immediately after the war, work was scarce but Dad was able to get a job at Longbridge, at what was the known as *The Austin*. That only lasted a short time and soon he moved to Benjamin Priest in Old Hill, assisting his own father who was Commercial Manager. They were to be his employers for the rest of his paid working life.

It was also after returning home from National Service that he got to know my mother, then Winifred Berriman, and they became engaged around 1950. Dad once told me that this was the time his life really began – I think he meant that my Mother instilled in him self-belief and a sense of purpose. They were married on 31 March 1951, and from then on, family became the central focus of his life. James was born in November 1952, myself August 1956.

The major challenge of these years arose when my bother Jimmy was diagnosed as Autistic in 1964. At this time this condition was virtually unknown and, sad to say, the advice offered was that that he could only be accommodated in an institution. My parents comprehensively rejected this outlook and, with the courage and love which were the hallmarks of their lives, brushed aside the advice and instead resolved to look after him themselves for as long as was necessary, a resolution that was to shape much of their remaining lives.

Meanwhile, notwithstanding his lack of academic qualifications, Dad proved to possess many talents of value in a business environment. He was an excellent administrator, possessed fine judgement, was utterly reliable and always followed tasks through. Over time he rose through the ranks, becoming Commercial Manager, Commercial Director and eventually Managing Director of Benjamin Priest & Sons for many successful years, also severing a term as Chair of the industry body - The Black Bolt and Nut Association.

A fellow group director from those times wrote to me a few days ago to say that he and Gerald

both shared Christian values in personally caring for those who worked for them – something quite revolutionary in the post-war era of command and control. One the reasons that Gerald was so much admired by those who worked for him and with him.

His time with Benjamin Priest came to an end in the recession of the early 1980's when he took early retirement.

5. West Midland Autistic Society

Retirement though is not really the right word. He threw himself with enormous energy into an ambition which had grown over time – to address the total dearth of provision for autistic adults in the West Midlands. He approached this task through his position as Development Officer of the West Midland Autistic Society (now *Autism West Midlands*). This is what a fellow parent of a person with autism had to say about those times:

The amount of time and effort Gerald put into this task was phenomenal as he explored all avenues and perused every opportunity until he was successful in finding suitable premises at Oakfield Road and obtained the backing of Birmingham Social Services, the Regional Hospital Board and the Family Housing Association to augment our own meagre resources. A principal was appointed and Oakfield House came into being in 1989 and was opened by Princess Anne.

Two more care homes followed and he had the honour of the MBE bestowed on him at the Palace in 1990.

No greater tribute to this work can be paid that to say that these facilities are still operating today in a way that is, in all the essentials, as they were set up based in his careful work. There are still residents there who were there on day one and they are truly succeeded in giving many people the best possible life they could have.

It wasn't until 1995 that he retired from the West Midland Autistic Society.

6. Mom's dementia

Life though was soon to present another great challenge. Around the turn of the century, my mother developed the cruel disease of vascular dementia. The next ten years were to be devoted to her care, making her as comfortable as can be imagined and meeting her every need. His administrative abilities came to the fore again as he orchestrated a cottage industry devoted to her care, demonstrating boundless patience and love and making maximum use of all available resources. That he was so successful in easing her difficulties was due, in no small measure, to the pleasure carers took in helping him, so evident was the genuine devotion that was his motivation.

When Mom died at the age of 88 in 2010, he himself was stricken with illness and his own life seemed under threat. Happily though he recovered to enjoy another decade which would bring its own experiences.

7. Last days in Cheltenham

In 2012, Jimmy left his long-term placement at Somerset Court and came to live with me for a short while, with Dad providing most of the support. Following that interlude, we decided it would be best if Dad came to live with me in Cheltenham on a permanent basis and this proved to be an excellent arrangement.

He remained closely involved in Jimmy's care and formed a strong relationship with the staff at the Coach House, the care home in Tewkesbury where was Jimmy is still resident. For many years, Jimmy visited us twice a week and Dad was always busy looking after him on these visits. Dad also phoned him every day, forever fielding his various concerns and worries.

There were illnesses too, but this did not prevent very many memorable trips. We went to Paris, to Assisi, to St Winfried's Well in Wales (where we donated a bench in memory of my mother), to Norfolk, Sussex, Peterborough and twice to Wimbledon as well as many trips around the Cotswolds and to other favourite places such as Malvern, Evesham and Stratford. We also make regular visits back to the West Midlands to see friends and relatives.

When at home, we had many visits from friends and relatives. He also enjoyed total control of the five TV remote-controls, ensuring that no significant tennis, cricket or football event passed him by. DVDs of old films and period drama were another inexhaustible source of entertainment.

There was also a wonderful 90th birthday celebration in 2017, when representatives of the families of all five Price brothers were brought together in one place (arriving from all over the world) for the first time in forty years.

Less cheerfully, Dad suffered a serious bout of pneumonia in January 2020 and, though he remained mentally alert, he was weakened as a result. This did not prevent many excursions around the Cotswolds over the recent spring and summer, as and when regulations permitted.

His final few weeks though, were not comfortable and when he died on 23 December, he had little left to give. It was a mercy that his difficulties were not prolonged.

8. Conclusion

Sad as I am that he is no longer with us, I feel great comfort in realising that his life was complete, in every sense of the word. He had fought the good fight; he had finished the race; he had kept the faith.

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