Eulogy - Michael Duck (1936-2020)

The task of condensing a life into a few thousand words is not an easy one, particularly when that life was as rich as my Dad’s. So how do you go about it? Oscar Wilde said that you can ‘judge a man by the effect he has over his friends’. Well judging by the last few days, it is clear that Dad has had a significant impact on a great many people – and I’d like to thank you all for being here today to celebrate his life. You were all special to him, as were a number of others that sadly weren’t able to come.

Reading through your memories of him this week has been a big comfort, and highlighted a number of interesting aspects to his character. So I’m going to talk about six of those now.

So what sort of person was Mike Duck?

**Firstly – Dad loved people, he was gregarious, sociable and he enjoyed life to the full**

He was born in Bristol, in November of 1936 into a very loving household – he was an only child, and doted on by his mother Doris who I think imparted to him the softness and warmth we all knew. Despite growing up during WWII, his parents shielded him from most of the hardships of that period. His father Harry was an upstanding RAF officer who kept the Spitfires flying, and was perhaps the source of Dad’s strong sense of pride in his country.

When Dad was three, the family moved to Tilehurst in Reading which changed the course of Dad’s future – and of course his accent. I still wonder what he would have sounded like with a West Country Bristolian accent.

This stable, nurturing childhood moulded him into the kind of person that could make close friendships at every step of his journey through life, and crucially, to retain them – from his classmates at Reading School in the 40’s, right through to the consultants and nurses at the Churchill Hospital who worked so hard to fight Dad’s cancer this year. Once you made friends with him, that friendship tended to last – not least because of the efforts he always made to keep in touch.

He also encouraged his friends to meet each other, creating new links. One of the ways he achieved this was by holding a great many parties during my childhood at the house in Hagbourne. He was a cooker of curries, a brewer of elderflower wine and amateur English beer, and even enjoyed the odd puff of a cigarette from time to time.

All this created a fun, family environment for Richard and I – and despite his socialising activities, and his numerous clubs, he was always a family man – always there for Mum, Richard and I when we needed him. When we lost Mum to cancer in 2008, the family was knocked for six but Dad kept the family bonds intact and brought us back to a new normal.

**The second aspect I wanted to bring out was that he was a facilitator / an instigator / someone who made things happen**

Dad was captain of the Didcot Chess club for decades – his management of the club was no small undertaking and he moulded it into something very successful. Even as late as this year, in quite ill health, he launched the online ‘Corona’ tournament to overcome the challenge of Lockdown.

He also played a similar role at the Harwell Croquet club, working to ensure the availability and upkeep of lawns, a stream of new players and of course the matches. I’m so glad that he managed to spend a little time teaching my daughter Maggie to play, doing for her as he did for me – setting up our shots so that we couldn’t fail to knock the ball through the hoop when it was our turn.

Dad and mum also took many long weekends with their friends in the village to a number of exciting European destinations – during which dad would always achieve two things: forcing everyone to play bridge against their will... and secondly, losing his wallet.

He also liked to set up activities that would result in him ending up at a pub - the monthly lunch club which met at the wonderful ‘Horse and Harrow’, boat trips along the Thames, walks through his beloved Oxfordshire with friends and family, even if they included clambering over barbed wire, legging it through fields with bulls, or trudging through mud – anything to get to that pub at the end. Yes, sometimes the Duck events went slightly awry, but that never stopped him from arranging the next one, or his friends from wanting to come along.

**The third aspect was his drive to keep learning, such as his participation in the Anglo-German clubs where he made some very important friendships**

Dad graduated from Reading University in 1958 with a degree in Chemistry, which was to be his life long passion. He was one of those lucky people that know what they want to do early in life, and then get a job doing it. In October of that year, he was accepted for the position of Research Chemist at AERE Harwell, the exciting new Government project to harness the power of the atom for peaceful means.

He spent much of his time working out how to make nuclear power stations safer, carrying out controlled experiments that modelled what would happen if something went wrong in the reactor core. This was somewhat ironic, given his disinterest in health and safety. He recalled a time when he and a colleague, moving some radioactive material from one building to another, drove off with it on the roof of the car.

Working closely with his dear friend and mentor Professor Michael Petry, he achieved a PHD in the Theory of Colour and published ‘The Bezold-Brucke phenomenon and Goethe’s rejection of Newton’s ‘Opticks’’ - repeating all the original experiments – some of them highly complex - from the upstairs study in our home. He took his theory on the road, delivering lectures in such far flung places as Toronto and Siberian Russia. It was later turned into a printed book and has made its way into a number of esteemed institutions around the world such as the Didcot library.

The last thing Dad worked on at Harwell was a special coating for the solar panels fitted to satellites. His invention resisted the electrostatic discharge caused by the sun, which extended the satellite’s lifespan significantly. A sample of his coating was fired into space on the French Arianne rocket (part of the European Space Agency programme) and is apparently still orbiting the earth.

But where Dad excelled in all things high brow, he was perhaps less accomplished in more down to earth areas such as: Driving – I have never seen so many bumps, scratches, or dents on a car as I have on dad’s Focus. Dad would often do his own cosmetic repairs using duct tape (no pun intended) and 10 year old brush paint that never quite matched the rest of the bodywork. And let’s not forget the replacement perspex window he fitted to his Jaguar and drove around in for over a year.

He also appeared not to possess an iron, or indeed any ironing skills - I’m assuming that he had grown up with one of those magic washing baskets that some men have that amazingly seem to clean, press and hang up our clothes. In fact clothes in general were not dad’s strong point – he never bought new ones or ever seemed to look in the mirror. You could say he sported the classic Harwell Scientist look.

**The fourth aspect was his rebellious side**

Having bought a new house in Hagbourne in 1975 to be close to his work, he was then shocked to learn that we were outside the catchment area of Chilton school. To solve that problem, he and I ‘moved’ to Crafts End Chilton sleeping on the floor of an empty bungalow for a few nights and he then resubmitted the application. His request was approved, but he was not in the school’s good books for quite some time once they found out.

Another example of his rebellious side relates to our next-door neighbours - the Riley’s. As a teenager, Andrew Riley went through a period of playing heavy metal music in his bedroom with the window open. This annoyed dad who liked to sit in his garden in peace, so he decided to move his hifi speakers onto the window ledge and play hard core Germanic opera at full blast back at Andrew. The two of them battled it out for a few minutes until Andrew finally gave up.

**The fifth aspect was his inner confidence and mild obsessions**

I’m talking about

* Nuclear power
* Brexit
* Germany (especially Munich)
* Classical music
* Great military battles
* Pitlochry and it’s breakfasts
* How everyone should be playing Bridge
* How all children should be learning chess

But I won’t elaborate on any of those topics, because Dad did enough campaigning during his lifetime!

He was also confident enough to take the family on some pretty unorthodox holidays, such as the £50 ‘5 night holiday in Mayerhofen’ (Austria). It was £50 for a reason. We took off from an abandoned military airbase, and spent 3 of those 5 nights on a coach travelling to and from the resort. But Dad turned it into a success by getting everyone on the bus to sing songs all the way there and all the way back. Until one gentleman from Wigan threatened to knock dad’s block off if he didn’t ‘shut that racket up now!’

Once he retired, he worked part time as a lab manager in Abingdon alongside a number of ladies from Singapore – funnily enough he absolutely loved that role. Even more than Harwell. He even managed to incorporate a 2000 mile detour on a family holiday to visit a Chinese chemical factory used by the firm. You can imagine how much my mum liked that one!

**The sixth aspect (and last, you’ll be pleased to know) was his brutal honesty and interesting take on common sense**

The last story I’ll tell relates to his time at Harwell in the mid-eighties – at the height of the cold war. Dissatisfied with the decline of funding into Harwell, he wanted to find another company to stay at the forefront of nuclear research. He happened to see the Chinese premier on TV talking about their ambitious nuclear plans and wanted in on the action. So he decided to write a letter to the Chinese embassy and ask for a job on the Chinese nuclear programme. What could possibly go wrong? A few days later at an undisclosed Oxfordshire location he was interrogated by two members of MI5. He was suspected to have ties with a foreign aggressor. Thankfully after several hours of questioning, they let him go. Only Dad could get himself into such a pickle, and then come out the other side unscathed.

He will be loved, missed and remembered by us all because of these wonderful attributes that only he had. So it with a heavy heart that I have to say Goodbye Dad, God Bless, and ‘Auf Wiedersehen, mein Freund’.