

# Earl of Donoughmore obituary: pioneer of handheld transistor radio

**Doctor who turned to business and became part of the Swinging Sixties radio craze with the launch of Perdio**

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Hely Hutchinson in 1962 with a Perdio TV set that proved to be too far ahead of its time

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An advertisement in *The Times* led to Michael Hely Hutchinson, the future eighth Earl of Donoughmore, becoming a driving force behind the 1960s craze for brightly coloured portable transistor radios to listen to pop music from the North Sea pirate radio stations. But within a few years the business over-extended and went bust.

Under the courtesy title Viscount Suirdale, Hely Hutchinson was a medical doctor who turned to business to pay his four sons' school fees. The advert was placed by Derek Willmott, a former wartime RAF pilot who had discovered that the transistors used to power radar detectors could be adapted for radio. Previously radios had used bulky, light bulb-sized valves that made the receivers too unwieldy to carry; now there was the prospect of portable radio. He even thought of a name: Perdio, taken from "personal radio".

Willmott did not know how to exploit his idea commercially, so an accountant friend, Anthony Richards, suggested the advert. In return for investing £500, the softly spoken Suirdale took a controlling stake and became chairman and managing director. They started production in 1957, also making portable television sets, but that proved too far ahead of its time.

Perdio was initially successful, selling one in eight of all UK-made radios by early 1962. The firm employed 800 people and Suirdale set up a Chicago office to spearhead exports. But Perdio could not keep up with demand so, to pay for a larger factory, Suirdale floated the firm on the stock market. His shareholding reached the value of £650,000; he wrote himself a seven-year contract; and

Richards joined the board. However, the new factory cost more than expected, and Hong Kong and Japanese imports ate into sales. Within two years Perdio needed another cash injection.

In his efforts to rescue the situation, Suirdale was drawn into a complex web of dealings with Richards, who was also the director of another public company, Brayhead. Richards persuaded him to sell his key Perdio share stake to Brayhead in return for a seat on the Brayhead board. Suirdale then lent Brayhead £45,000 and guaranteed a bank loan of another £50,000. But Perdio went from bad to worse, Brayhead withheld any further support and the firm was liquidated owing £926,380. Its assets were bought cheaply by Dansette, a record turntable maker. Meanwhile, Brayhead refused to return Suirdale's loans.

Suirdale sued Brayhead for £93,497. Brayhead's lawyers argued that Richards did not have the authority to commit Brayhead to borrowing the money from him, so did not have to repay it. The Master of the Rolls, Lord Denning, ruled that because Brayhead's board had allowed Richards to act as he did, "actual authority" had been established and the commitments stood. It set a precedent that a company can be bound by the actions of a director, even if his powers have not been formally defined. Despite the legal victory it was a harrowing experience for Suirdale, who never publicly spoke of the episode. Ironically, Perdio radios are now prized by collectors, and there is a lively trade on eBay.

Richard Michael John Hely Hutchinson, known as Mick, was born in 1927, the son of John Hely Hutchinson, the seventh Earl of Donoughmore, a wartime Tory MP for Peterborough, and Dorothy Jean Hotham, who was in charge of the Red Cross in London's East End during the Second World War. She worked with Edwina Mountbatten and in 1947 was appointed MBE. In 1974 John and Dorothy were kidnapped for four days by the Provisional IRA and released when their members ended a prison hunger strike.

Mick's younger brother is Mark Hely Hutchinson, the former chief executive of the Bank of Ireland, and they had a sister, Sara. They were sent to America during the Second World War to stay with relatives and attend Groton School in Massachusetts, where Mick discovered an interest in sciences. His parents, concerned that he would miss the Oxford entrance examination, brought him home at the end of 1943, not realising the North Atlantic was still bristling with German U-boats. An attack sank several ships in his convoy as he stood watching from his own ship, which remained unscathed. He finished secondary education with an unhappy spell at Winchester College and it took a crammer to get him into New College, Oxford, where he graduated with a degree in medicine.

For his National Service Hely Hutchinson became a captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps, working with soldiers in the mornings and helping impoverished women in childbirth in the afternoons and evenings. He then became a registrar in obstetrics and gynaecology at London's Westminster Hospital. In 1951 he married Sheila (née Parsons), a nurse he had met when he was training at St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, west London. She died of complications from kidney failure in 1999.

Mick and Sheila had four sons: John, Timothy, Nicholas and Ralph. John, who became Viscount Suirdale and is now the ninth Earl, was an executive with Dunhill and Burberry in Asia. Tim has run Headline Books, later Hodder Headline, which his father chaired from 1986 to 1997. Nicholas is an artist and Ralph a stockbroker. A shooting friend introduced Mick to Margaret "Meg" Morgan (née Stonehouse) and they married in 2001.

When his children were growing up Hely Hutchinson began investing in property and scouring the newspapers for opportunities. After Perdio, he found a job through family connections with the Belgian jams and preserves operations of WR Grace, the American conglomerate, before moving to the firm's European head office in Paris. He and an earlier boss there left to form an investment company, Heller & Suirdale, which bought property and invested in firms, making among other things briefcases and ladders.

Hely Hutchinson retired largely because of Sheila's kidney failure. They moved to the Oxfordshire village of Bampton to be near Oxford's John Radcliffe infirmary, an early specialist in renal treatment. Mick operated a home dialysis machine until she could receive a kidney transplant. He succeeded to his father's titles in 1981 and sat in the House of Lords under the UK peerage Viscount Hutchinson, contributing to health debates but losing his seat after the House of Lords Act 1999 restricted the number of hereditary peers.

Mick became vice-president of St Luke's Hospital, Oxford, and chaired Bampton parish council and other local charities. He raised funds to create the three-acre Bampton recreation ground and build its pavilion, saving the local church by finding over £400,000 to replace the roof. "Dad was quiet, shy, friendly, highly intelligent, kind and generous to a fault," Tim said. "But he was not good at relaxing. He was particularly bad at holidays: he didn't like bright sunshine and tended to fret about arrangements."

His interests were shooting, fishing, cricket and horse racing. His part-owned filly, Ruby Tiger, won the Nassau Stakes at Goodwood and leading races in France, Germany, Canada and the US. His gelding Cyrian won the Northumberland Plate.

At Headline Books Mick kept a fatherly eye on Tim, who recalled: "When the warehouse management wanted to buy more electric trucks to avoid downtime while they were being charged, Dad pointed out that it would be much cheaper just to buy spare batteries."

**The Earl of Donoughmore, doctor and businessman, was born on August 8, 1927. He died on April 25, 2025, aged 97**