

Eulogy for John Honour Willmer
of
Friars Court, Clanfield, Oxfordshire, OX18 2SU



11th November 1920 to 11th August 2014

Read by Charles Willmer
at the Memorial Service held at
St Mary's Church, Bampton, Oxfordshire
Tuesday 16th September 2014

My father, John Honour Willmer, was born on the 11th November 1920 at Friars Court, the son of Richard Newman Willmer and his wife Mary Elisabeth Honour and he was the eldest brother to three sisters; Joan, Molly and Ruth.

He was educated, at first, at Miss Walker's School in Witney then at 9 years old he went to Kingswood School in Bath. He considered himself a 'Dunce' although records show that he excelled in Maths, Physics, Chemistry and Geography.

40 years later he was made President of the Kingswood Old Boys Union.

Leaving school my father was sent to Bradford to learn the wool trade where for two years he trained how to card and spin wool during the day, then three evenings a week he went to Bradford Technical College where he furthered his education by learning banking and foreign exchange.

In Bradford he was part of a group of six friends and together they joined the local Tennis Club, church group and set up a Sunday School which, at one time, boasted 200 pupils.

Father was at the Mill for just two years before he was asked to leave as, apparently, he had learnt so much he was considered a threat to the business. It was at this time war broke out and father, along with his friends, wanted to sign up for the RAF. Unfortunately he was unable to join as he was told by the Ministry of Agriculture to return to Friars Court - the farm at that time was not being well managed and if he was unable to turn it around his family would be removed and replaced with another.

For the next few years father worked hard, hand milking the herd of cows and managing the 200 acres. He joined the Home Guard the day it was formed and Corporal Willmer would spend many nights guarding Radcot Bridge. In addition he went on training courses where he learnt to use the Lewis Gun, the North-over Projector and the Sticky Bomb.

Sadly within this time four of his six friends from Bradford were killed and it was from this that he decided to dedicate his life achieving the things they could not

After the war father had dramatically improved the farm and increased the acreage, however not content with farming he also became involved with a number of committees and organisations. During the 50's he went to his first meeting of the Witney National Farmers Union, which just so happened to be its AGM, and a few hours later left as the new Branch Vice-Chairman – ten years later he was County Chairman. He joined the committee of the local Young Farmers - for which again later he was elected County Chairman.

Over the years he has also been on the board of the Woodland Trust, FWAG, Thames Water, West Oxfordshire Technical College, Luton Industrial College, Westminster Teacher Training College and Treasurer for the Home Missions. Closer to home, until his mid 70's, he was a long-serving Member of Clanfield Parish Council – which, of course, included time as Chairman.

He enjoyed travel and before settling into married life had embarked on a variety of trips, visited many countries and in 1959 gained local notoriety by going on an, unusual for the era, 'around the world' trip and a few years later he was part of one of the first groups to visit post-war Communist Russia.

Marriage came late to father and it was quoted in the Oxfordshire Farmer Journal that he was described as one of the most eligible bachelors in the county and that for several years' ladies had been speculating to know with whom he would settle down with.

All that changed in 1963 when father went to the Acland Hospital in Oxford for a minor operation when the beautiful, but formidable, Nurse Jackson walked into his room – and he didn't stand a chance. I have it on good authority that my mother told her colleagues "hand's off Room 21 – he's mine".

My parents were married in Moreton-in-the-Marsh church on the 8th February 1964 and honeymooned in Gran Canaria. They settled into Friars Court and the family quickly grew; Carol was born in '66, Mary in '67 and then me in 1970. Tragically Mary died of cancer in 1975, and then ten years later Carol was killed in a cycling accident whilst travelling in Australia

This was a double, hard blow, for my parents however father had his faith in god to help him through those difficult years. Between them they established the Carol & Mary Trust Fund and our charity is now used to help causes locally, nationally and internationally.

Over the year's father built up the farm from its original 212 acres to over 550 and it boasted a herd of sixty Friesian cows in addition to the arable. Diversification was a watchword in the house with father always looking at new and different ways to manage the land. It was during a tour with the Institute of Bankers in the '70s that they said they were surprised that meadows adjacent to the Thames wasn't being utilised and from this suggestion a caravan site, interplanted with Cricket Bat trees was created and an old backwater dredged to make boat moorings.

It was in the 80's that renewable energies started to become an important part of his life. Many years before he had built a grain dryer which used a powerful electric fan with heater elements to dry the corn. In 1985 these heater elements burnt out and upon enquiring father found that the company that made them had long since gone out of business. One option was to replace the whole system which would have proved very costly. It was when sitting in our conservatory one evening that father realised how warm it was inside whilst cold out. With this in mind he built a simple framework of wood and Perspex around the still working fan and for the next 6 years all grain was dried using free solar energy. There was, of course, a degree of scepticism from various journalists however they all had to conclude that the system did work. Indeed one student who wrote a report, which he didn't know father would read, said that "John Willmer was a rich but eccentric farmer". My mother said that she knew he was one but was uncertain about the other.

Faith and farming were central to his life. Frequently his observations of nature would find their way into the sermons he gave as a Methodist lay preacher. His talks relating to wildlife and conservation began to attract interest from his congregations who were keen to visit Friars Court and so a nature trail was established from where walkers could see the woods, lakes, meadows and various wildlife habitats he had created and in 1986 this won a Best Farm Trail competition.

Father used to like referring to the four C's; cows, corn, caravans and conservation

What started as a sideline soon became a business and at the end of the 80's, at the age of 70, father decided to change the structure of the farm. To this effect most of the farm equipment was sold and all but the best dairy cows went to auction and a small beef unit was created in its stead. The revenue raised was poured back into the business; a tearoom was created and whilst mother baked scones and cakes, father conducted tours – they made quite a team. In addition to all this change we were invited up to Buckingham Palace where father was awarded the OBE for services to the Home Missions and conservation. A few years later he was also appointed a Fellow of the Royal Agricultural Society and became a Paul Harris Fellow.

In 1990 father found that his passion for renewable energy and conservation could, quite literally, grow side by side and he was very proud when he became one of five farmers in the country elected by the Department of Trade & Industry to grow willow trees as a biomass crop on our arable land. Whilst the willow may not have succeeded in the way he had hoped father sensed the opportunities and helped some young willow weavers set up in business – some of their 'thank you' presents are still growing in our garden.

In '96 more space was needed for the growing number of visitors to the farm and my parents decided to build the Garden Room as an extension to the house and for many months it was my mother's main project. Towards the end of it however she was diagnosed with a brain tumour but she resolutely ensured that the room was completed the way she wanted it before she died. The Garden Room was, and remains, dedicated in her memory.

Father continued with his renewable projects and I am sure there are more than a few people here today who have been presented with a low-energy light bulb or had heard about the benefits of solar power long before anyone thought about installing panels on their roofs. He was also introduced to the Oxford Speakers Club where he could take his passion of talking to a new level.

Father continued to run and manage the farm well into his 80's and regularly went on long walks with his faithful Labrador – sometimes they were so long that we had to send out search parties in the dark. It was also late in life that he decided that he needed to keep up with modern technology and bought a computer so he could surf the net. However being not very conversant with a keyboard he did he did come up with some interesting results – for example he couldn't understand why when looking up 'wind turbines over 50 kilowatts' he kept on finding information all about 'widows over 50'.

In 2011 father was diagnosed with progressive heart failure which slowed him down for the first time. However whilst he was unable to do any physical management he still oversaw the day-to-day running of the farm.

He remained very active for the last few years and enjoyed going out and being social – especially his weekly trips to the Clanfield 'Drop-in', the Hideaway and Bampton Bush Club – and of course he always impeccably dressed in a jacket and tie.

When carers moved in to Friars Court to look after him he also discovered a new way of exercising which involved pushing a shopping trolley around a supermarket and chatting away to everyone... not that he could always hear what was being said back to him.

He died peacefully on Monday 11th August at Friars Court - in the bedroom where he was born 93 years earlier.

Father will be remembered for many reasons; his wisdom, charity, and forward thinking.... but I know many people will also remember him for his ditties;

*Old age is golden, I've heard it said,
But sometimes I wonder as I get into bed,
With my ears in the drawer, my teeth in the cup,
My eyes on the table until I wake up.
When sleep overtakes me, I think to myself
Is there anything else I could lay on the shelf?*

*I get up each day and dust off my wits,
And pick up the paper and read the 'obits'.
If my name is still missing, I know I'm not dead -
So I have a good breakfast and go back to bed.*

Thank you