

Tribute to Captain John Stewart OBE

by Stephen Fell NSch

Having gone back to work on the family farm, described by Hugh as a village Heinz 57 farm, John took over the management of the family farm in Weston Underwood in 1960 on his father's retirement – a 550-acre mixed farm with cattle and sheep.

In 1964 he was awarded a Nuffield Farming Scholarship to study UK and European beef production. It was a trip that proved to be a catalyst for change on the farm, as well as for his future with Nuffield. In addition to the technical knowledge he gained on the three month trip, tremendous, long lasting friendships were formed with the French Chovet family, continuing two generations on.

At the time, John - along with another Nuffield Scholar, John Cyster - were on the NFU Council when, in 1968, the Nuffield Foundation (the legacy of Lord Nuffield – William Morris) announced that it could no longer administer and finance the Scholarships. John took over as Secretary and, along with John Cyster, ran the new Trust, set about raising a substantial sum of money and persuaded the Duke of Gloucester to become Patron.

John became Director of the Nuffield Farming Scholarship Trust in 1968. In his 20 years of directorship, he firmly established the Trust in the UK and hugely supported the scheme in several countries of the British Commonwealth - Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the African Countries of Kenya, Zimbabwe and Tanzania. He brought France into the scheme in 1982 – and his love of food and wine made that addition most satisfactory.

There are now 1,600 Scholars worldwide, representing the most fantastic network of bright and innovative people in agriculture, and John had a massive part to play in that success story.

John first came into my consciousness in the late 1970s, when my father was a selector. Farming myself in Kent at the time, I was persuaded to apply for a Nuffield Farming Scholarship by one Chris Older, who told me that it would be a life changing experience. How right he was!

The man directing this life changing experience was of course John. A big, outwardly gruff man, his imposing presence compelled you to listen and take his advice.

Having come through the ordeal of the interview in 1983, our disparate band of 'would be high fliers' were brought together at Wye to be briefed. I tell you this was a briefing for life. Starting with 'Navy Time' – always be five minutes ahead of a meeting - and to this day, if anyone is late meeting me, I think of John. He even ensured that we knew how to meet Royalty – a brief nod of the head, 'not bending around at the waist like a Grosvenor Hotel footman!'

He was sending us out into the world as 'Ambassadors of British Agriculture' and he wanted to make sure that we would not let the side down. I always remember landing in Australia and being taken straight to an Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio studio and being put on a live broadcast. After the initial pleasantries, the interviewer asked me why the European Community was flooding the world with cheap beef.

I blessed John for his briefings and in particular for taking us to Brussels - the first UK group of Scholars to go - for some intense meetings of various members of the Commission. As a result, I knew much more about EU beef policies than my Australian interviewer.

John's carefully laid plans for a Brussels trip start to go awry on the 1st morning. The previous evening, the now very respectable James Black from Angus brought over a large quantity of duty free Scotch which was downed that night. Navy Time was in danger of falling apart, so Eileen was despatched to round everyone up. And, so we had the wonderful spectacle of John striding off ahead, with a motley band strung out behind him being shepherded by the mother hen at the rear – Eileen.

The gastronomic appeal of this tour was never far from John's mind, of course, and the bond was struck between us, the '83 Squad', and John and Eileen. Upon departure from Brussels, we presented them with a pewter coffee pot - inscribed the '83 Squad – and on a regular basis thereafter we met up with them both, with coffee always taken from the pot.

This same '83 Squad (arrogantly nicknamed the "Dream Team" as we have produced three Nuffield Chairman and many other leaders in the industry), still meet regularly and the coffee pot ritual will be a precious reminder of John's influence and friendship.

To Roger Derryman he said: "You probably won't come back with any earth shattering information – it's been done before – but you will come back a different person, to take on the challenge of modern agriculture and to lead others within it." He was dead right.

His rigid organisation of the overseas Scholars was a tough ordeal for some of the more laid back of them, particularly the Ozzies. Lessons in wine tasting, protocol and even thank you letter writing went down in various ways. I always remember the Scholar who farmed an area half the size of Wales near Ayers Rock, who had never worn a tie before coming over, being kitted out in my morning suit under John's beady eye, to go to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party.

John and Eileen opened their home to these overseas Scholars and Hugh has passed me on this letter from Robbie Burnside, a NZ Scholar of 1972 (part of the contents of the letter were read out).

Peter Nixon from Australia is the current Nuffield International Chairman and has sent his tribute.

John and Eileen were caravaners. They pulled it behind the trusty Volvo to the Royal Show every year and set up 'Nuffield Shop' in front of it, offering glasses of wine to existing and prospective Scholars. After retiring, they used to come up every year to Yorkshire and set up camp on a paddock next to our house. He always used to fascinate our children, regaling them with a wonderful fund of stories, with Eileen correcting or prompting where necessary. We entertained them, and they cooked for us in the caravan, always with an excellent selection of wines.

How we all missed their visits when it got too much for them.

Through John's advice and help and example and friendship, we as Scholars 'in the big Nuffield family learned long before Barak Obama came on the scene with his simple powerful message that – Yes – we can do it! Yes – we can make our mark and be leaders in British Agriculture. We learned to wear our Nuffield ties with pride, and the Nuffield Farming organisation throughout the world, and in particular those Scholars who had the privilege to be HIS Scholars, will never forget Captain John Stewart.