

Donald Clark – A Tribute



Donald Clark was a larger than life character, a relic from a bygone era when Britain still ruled an empire.

He was also a wonderful raconteur and I only wish I had used a tape recorder to capture anecdotes of his remarkable life. The following is my recollection and if there are a few inaccuracies I hope you will forgive them...

When I think of Donald I see in my mind that look which, in the blink of an eye would change from bemusement though comprehension to enlightened amusement, a simple smile that for me encapsulated not only the charm of the man but was also a constant reminder of his two sons.

I first met Glenn, Shaun, 'Babs' and Donald (in that order) in September of 1969 when the two brothers and I started at Kelly College, a Public School just outside Tavistock. An institution that to this day bears an uncanny resemblance to Her Majesty's Prison, Dartmoor, situated just a few miles to the east.

Being born in Sheffield, Donald was first and foremost a Yorkshireman. He was the second child of George and Agnes Clark, a brother to Peggy and he subsequently gained two more sisters, Molly and Mary. His father was an electrical contractor and at the end of the war the family moved to Bridlington. For as long as I can recall, Donald has always considered 'Brid' to be 'home'.

At the age of 14 however, with the outbreak of WW2 imminent Donald falsified his age and joined the Merchant Navy. On the very first voyage his ship was torpedoed by a German frigate in the South Pacific and he was taken prisoner answering to POW No. Aacht und dreizig (38) – and 'Cluck' for his captors never could pronounce Clark.

The German captain was a good man who saw that his prisoners were well treated. After several months at sea they docked in Hamburg from where they were transferred to a Prison camp. The older prisoners told him to say he was a farmer's son when interrogated. Needless to say being a strapping young lad he was picked for work on a local farm. Although he knew very little about farming, he adapted to the role which not only gave him an opportunity to provide fresh food for his fellow prisoners, but led to a very pleasant liaison with the farmer's daughter... He did however find time to send a card home confirming his safety to the immense delight of his family who for over 6 months had feared the worst.

Donald concluded life as a PoW was not so bad – at least he was safe but at roll call one morning a large number of prisoners including Donald were told to collect their belongings and re-assemble as they were being moved. They had no idea where they were

going but were put on coaches as opposed to the usual trucks before being transferred to a passenger train. Their journey took them south through Germany, France and Spain and lasted several days. They eventually arrived in Lisbon where the Allies had cornered a German Destroyer and had brokered a deal whereby the crew were 'swapped' for equivalent ranks from Allied PoWs in Germany.

Donald saw out much of the remainder of the War on Russian and Atlantic convoys but as luck would have it his ship was in the Indian Ocean when the war finished. They docked in Calcutta where the British Ambassador held a garden party to celebrate the end of the war and to which the crew were invited. Here Donald met a representative of the Scottish tea company 'Duncan Brothers' who encouraged him to join them and gave him his business card. At the time however the prospect of being a Tea Planter did not appeal and instead he joined the Palestine Police.

A change in the political situation saw Donald back in Britain in need of a job but by now he had acquired a taste for travel and adventure. Finding the Duncan Brothers Business card in his wallet he wrote off to their head office. The response was an invitation to attend an interview in London. A First Class Rail ticket was enclosed and within a few weeks Donald was off to India. The only hiccup was that he failed the medical required for the company's insurance – it had revealed a weak heart but he assured them he was fighting fit and would arrange his own insurance. Donald quickly took to Colonial life and progressed rapidly from trainee to relief manager, then manager of a small Plantation eventually progressing to run Birpara.

Company rules forbade a Manager from marrying for a period of ten years and leave was only given to return to England once every four years.



It was on his second trip home that he was to meet Eileen 'Babs' Allen at the Royal Spa Dance Hall on the seafront in Bridlington.

The daughter of the 'professional' at Fulford Golf Club near York where she was born, 'Babs' was not only strikingly beautiful but unusually for a woman at the time had been to university and studied Pharmacy.

Despite the knowledge that his contract of employment specifically forbade marriage for at least a further two years, Donald nevertheless proposed and showing blind faith, 'Babs' agreed to marry him.



On his return to India, perhaps fortuitously his Plantation had not performed well in his absence and Duncan Brothers were keen that he should restore it to the levels he had achieved before his leave. In consequence, despite initially refusing him permission to marry, Donald prevailed, and tickets were sent to 'Babs' to travel to India where on the 4th of October 1952, she and Donald were married in St Paul's Cathedral, Calcutta.

They honeymooned in Goa and were soon riding on elephants, spotting tigers in the jungle, a world away from anything 'Babs' had ever known. Like Donald she loved India and quickly adjusted to being Memsahib.



One year and three days later saw the birth of their first son, Shaun and on the first of February 1956 Glenn arrived (named after Glenn Miller whose music Donald so enjoyed). Halcyon days indeed, the boys were looked after by their Aiya, spoke Hindi and were accustomed to tigers, snakes insects and such like. All was well until it was time to send the boys to school in England. I believe Donald enrolled them at a convent in Bridlington where the Mother Superior assured him they would be well cared for. It was only when she had agreed to accept the boys that Donald informed her that whilst fluent in Hindi they could speak very little English...



I'm not sure these were happy times for the two boys but 'Babs' was bereft and eventually Donald was persuaded to give up the life of a Tea Planter. He had spent 20 years in India and always maintained that but for 'Babs' and the boys he would never have left.



'Babs' in the garden at Birpara

On their return to England they bought a large house in Brookmans Park and Donald took a position with Reeves (then Graham Reeves, now simply Grahams) for whom he traveled the world setting up Industrial Plants, primarily in the manufacture of Paint. Spells in South Africa, Hong Kong, Singapore and Australia meant that he saw little of his family and so he resigned, deciding to plough their savings into a Newsagents.

Donald's favourite short story was 'The Verger' by W. Somerset Maugham the anniversary of whose birth coincidentally was the day Donald died, 25th January and who had spent his early childhood in India. However, unlike Albert Edward Foreman, Donald realized he had made a monumental mistake on the very first morning and resolved to sell the business on ASAP.

Having done, so the Clarks moved to Gunnislake on the Devon / Cornwall border. The Tavistock Hotel was at a low ebb and Donald and 'Babs' soon transformed its fortunes whilst the boys settled into life at Kelly. This was a particularly happy period and all made many friends.

Whilst on a visit to 'Babs' mother in 1973, Donald noticed a rather nice house for sale. Located in the village of Althorp (West Butterwick), just off the A18 between Doncaster and Scunthorpe, Donald saw in Lansdown House the potential for a smart Restaurant, one that would reflect his wife's growing confidence... 'Babs' had already received rave reviews from the Good Food Guide and the likes of Egon Ronay.

I remember the summer of that year not for the misery of failing my driving test (only once) but for the subsequent escape to West Butterwick. It was an exciting time, particularly Glenn's and my exploits behind the wheel of whatever motorcars we got our hands on. I was there for the opening night and in no time at all the great and the good were vying for space to park their Bentleys, Mercs, and Jaguars not forgetting the boy's favourites – Jensen Interceptors and a green Lamborghini Espada. A regular customer was a young Ian Botham who played football for Scunthorpe in the winter and Cricket in the summer.

With the boys having flown the nest and sensing it was time to move on, Donald and 'Babs' sold Lansdown House and rented a cottage near Ashboune in the Derbyshire Peak District. 'Babs' was soon in demand for her catering skills whilst Donald quickly became bored and so took the lease of a small shop which was to become 'The Sandwich Box'.

Both the boys had moved around with their respective jobs, Gillian and Shaun were in Wetherby whilst Glenn had moved to Southampton and was working on a contract at the Dept of Trade & Industry in Whitehall.



Shaun



Glenn

Tragically Glenn was one of 32 who lost their lives in the Clapham Rail disaster on 12 December 1988 and his loss would cast a long shadow from that point on. 'Babs' lost any faith she may have had in The Lord but nevertheless remained an inspiration as the loving and proud wife and mother we all adored. Donald became increasingly intolerant of bureaucracy and found it too painful to talk about their loss. For a time, the bottle was his solace.

However, on 30 November 1990 Shaun and Gillian had Adam. By this time 'Babs' had been battling with Breast Cancer, not the first major illness in her life as she had had TB as a girl which had prompted her parents to move to Galston on Sea near Gt Yarmouth on the Norfolk coast.

When Shaun, Gillian and Adam moved to Northern Ireland to build a house, be near Gillian's parents and set up their own 'Fast Food Restaurant' in Lisburn, Donald and 'Babs' soon followed.

Offering their services as House and pet sitters for a number of our friends gave us the opportunity to see more of Donald and 'Babs' although the arrival of Sophie not only delayed 'Babs' arrival but hastened her return to Lisbane. Left to his own devices there were a few mishaps – Donald would deal out crockery as if it were playing cards – quite oblivious of the fact that it was Royal Doulton.

We visited them too and there was rarely a dull moment... On one occasion I recall Donald was so busy pointing out Stormont after picking us up from Belfast City Airport that I had to grab the steering wheel to avoid a car stopped in front of us – it contained two policemen who were none too impressed. As if that were not enough excitement for one night, Joany realized that 'Babs' urgently needed an Ambulance in the middle of the night.

We lost 'Babs' on 10 January 2000, she had wanted to see the new Millennium and with typical stoicism she made it ... just and in a land then still deeply divided, only 'Babs' could have had a funeral where three ministers of opposing denominations including an Arch-deacon insisted on presiding – and did so in complete harmony.

The loss of Shaun two years later was perhaps the greatest tragedy but Adam and Sophie are a lasting legacy and one that 'Babs' and Donald were especially proud of.

Returning to Donald, here was a man who had not only seen the world but had always made the best of opportunities presented to him – despite being dubbed a pessimist.

“Never give up, never give in!” was one of his oft uttered phrases. “I like it, write it down” was another – how I wish I had!

He could be at once infuriating and charming; he had an inner resolve that enabled him to overcome the greatest setbacks that life could throw at one. He was both extrovert and shy, generous yet modest although when Donald bought Ice Creams, Easter Eggs or Hampers, he always ordered the largest!

With the encouragement of his grandchildren he bought a computer and searched the internet for people in his past – unfortunately with little success.

Most of all he loved drinking tea and the songs of Nat ‘King’ Cole so many of which he clearly identified with. He liked things done properly, hated queues and long goodbyes, was never wrong and could not abide poor punctuality – he would rather be an hour early than a minute late.

DONALD CLARK

7 January 1925 – 25 January 2008

RIP