

SIR JOHN SPARROW 1933-2020



John Sparrow latterly presented as an old fashioned gentleman, stolid, always punctual and meticulous, bowler hatted, formally dressed, shoes polished, modestly shy and with impeccable manners. He greatly valued his privacy. But in discussion or on a platform, he revealed a powerful intellect, shrewd worldly and witty, a gift for oral presentation, and strong political opinions. He artfully deployed logic and good humour to disarm those he found pompous, ill prepared or wrongheaded. He was a kind man who took others on their merits, and was not judgmental. He despised modern technology and refused to embrace the internet and social media preferring to communicate by telephone and by letter. He had a successful career in the City as a merchant banker, and with the many corporates who sought his advice. To relax, he loved horse-racing, and watching cricket as an MCC member. He was a devotee of difficult crosswords and entered and enjoyed success in several competitions.

John was born on 4 June 1933, the only son of Richard and Winifred Sparrow. Along with his sister Margaret, John was brought up in North London. After attending Coldfall Primary School, he was educated at the Stationers' Company's grammar school in Hornsey. As a tall lanky student at LSE between 1951 and 1954, he stood aside from the strife of the Student's Union, though he actively supported the Conservative cause. He became the popular Chairman of the Debating Society, and played a fine hand of bridge in the evenings. He

graduated with a respectable BSc (Econ.) and went on to become an FCA in 1957 having been articled to Rawlinson and Hunter. After short spells with Ford Motor Co and AEI-Hotpoint, he joined the Morgan Grenfell Group in 1964, became a group Director in 1971 specialising in investment banking, and finally retired in 1988 to concentrate on his many other business and social activities.

In 1967, he married Cynthia, a widow, and acquired two stepchildren Chris and Richard. It was a strong and happy marriage. While head of the investment department at Morgan Grenfell, his keen political interests found an unexpected outlet, although he never stood for Parliament. Early in 1977, John was invited to help Mrs. Thatcher, then Leader of the Opposition, work on the liberal economic policy ideas that she eponymously brought to Government two years later. John provided her with practical business-based ideas in weekly reports upon economic developments and City news and opinion. After Mrs. Thatcher arrived at No. 10, he was formally seconded from Morgan Grenfell in 1982 to become head of the Central Policy Review Staff (the “think tank”) in the Cabinet Office at No. 10. John was invited by the Chancellor (Geoffrey Howe) to “point up some possible long term options” at a time of high spending and low growth which culminated in a well-worked if controversial paper. John’s time at No. 10 was later referred to in Lord Howe’s memoir.

Following the closure of the Cabinet Policy Unit John returned to Morgan Grenfell and was knighted for his public service in 1984. He remained a champion of the free market and of private enterprise, a critic of supine government and of the EU, and he was a convinced Brexiteer, views he was to hold throughout the remainder of his life.

Upon leaving Morgan Grenfell in 1988 and having sat on many public boards, John’s talents remained in demand. He served ASW Holdings from 1987 to 1993 and Regalian Properties from 1990 to 1993.

Among other interests, John retained throughout his life great affection for LSE and his school. He was made a Governor of LSE in 1984 and was on the Court for 20 years. He quickly became Vice-Chairman and took over as acting Chairman for a year during a temporary vacancy. The Director Ralf Dahrendorf later wrote that John, “a calm and devoted Vice-Chairman, provided continuity as well as much needed help with an appeal for funding”. He was made an Honorary LSE Fellow in 1994. One of his private wishes, typical of the man, was that he did not want a formal Memorial Service but would like a lunch to celebrate his life with his close friends at the LSE, a wish that it is hoped to fulfil if and when circumstances permit.

But it was his appointments as Chairman of the National Stud between 1988 and 1991 and as Chairman of the Horserace Betting Levy Board (HBLB) by the hand of Home Secretary Kenneth Baker in 1991 that perfectly aligned work with his passionate love of horse racing. John and Cynthia loved horses and, while living in Gerrards Cross, involved themselves in various horse related activities, including the breeding of thoroughbreds. They also had horses with the trainer Henry Candy. The HBLB was a statutory body with the responsibility of collecting an annual levy from the betting industry, based on the profits made on horseracing, and spending it for the improvement of horseracing, the improvement of breeds of horses and the advancement or encouragement of veterinary science or veterinary education. It comprised representatives of the betting and horseracing industries plus three independent, Government appointed members, leading to vigorous debates on how much the levy should raise (around £50m per annum at that time) and how it should best be spent. Despite the widely varying views around the board table, John soon won the trust and respect of the members and achieved an agreement on strategic and policy objectives.

In 1993 it was decided that the HBLB’s ownership of three racecourses, Epsom Downs, Sandown Park and Kempton Park, originally purchased to save them from going out of business, could have led to a conflict of interest with the other racecourses, and that they should be sold. Sir John led the sale process, resulting in their acquisition by Racecourse Holdings Trust, which went on to improve them by substantial investment. He

ensured that the sale proceeds were used to create a capital fund to be used to finance interest free loans to any of the thoroughbred racecourses in the country which wished to improve their facilities for both horses and the public. During the seven years of his chairmanship John gained great pleasure from all aspects of the HBLB's activities, making regular visits with Cynthia to both flat and jumping courses in all parts of the country. According to his family this was one of the happiest periods of their lives.

John was a member and President of the Old Stationers' Association (OSA) in 1995-6 in the Centenary year of the foundation of the school by the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspapermakers and regularly attended meetings lunches and dinners of the OSA keeping in close touch with many friends of his year group and the wider membership. He was a member of the MCC regularly enjoying his seat in the Lord's pavilion in the company of other friends but did not embrace the shorter form of the game preferring the traditional test and county matches. He was also a lifelong supporter of Tottenham Hotspur FC - considered foolish by the other half of his school friends - supporters of that other team now playing at The Emirates stadium. Less conspicuously, John helped to organise over recent years a Reunion lunch for the Class of '44 which last met at the RAF Club Piccadilly in September 2019 for the enjoyment of seeing friends of his era. John was also selected for membership of the 'Apostles club' a select group of twelve Old Stationer bon viveurs lunching regularly again in London. John was a Liveryman of the Stationers' Company having been clothed in 1991 and was also a Freeman of the City of London. He worked on a number of Company's committees between 1996 and 2003 lending his business experience widely to work on the Charitable Trust, Livery committee and Entry qualifications review in 1992

John's final weeks passed sadly. Though in apparent good health, he had the misfortune to be involved in a serious car accident at the end of 2019. Though having to be cut free from the car by the Fire and Ambulance Services, he miraculously escaped serious injury as did the occupants of the other car but was badly shocked. He lost confidence and his sense of independence. He was unable to drive each day to the care home nearby where Cynthia now resides. He steadily lost energy and enthusiasm for life. He died peacefully in hospital on 21 March 2020.

He leaves a widow, Cynthia, a surviving step-son, step-grandchildren and extended family. He will be greatly missed.

Produced by Michael Brady with help from Michael Thomas and Rodney Brack