

Geoff Burgess Talk “Will I Ever Stop Learning?”

16.10.24, The Greyhound, Bromham

Born in the very non-rural Edgware area of London in 1941, Geoff started life as a city boy. However, his family moved to more rural Berkshire where his grandfather was the land agent at Cliveden – the country pile by the Thames famous for being one of the locations of the Profumo scandal.

It was whilst growing up here that Geoff became interested in farming and a later family move to the Essex/Hertfordshire border afforded him the chance to help out on local farms. This involved binding, horse-drawn ploughing and bagging on a trailed combine. All this hard work led Geoff to enrol on a one-year Agricultural course at Merrist Wood college in Surrey.

The spirit of adventure was evident as he and a couple of college friends purchased a Series Two Land Rover and planned to drive it overland to Singapore. Being sensible and practical Agricultural College students, they prepared for the trip by putting the Land Rover through its paces around the nearby Army training ground at Pirbright. The trip was eventful, and they managed to get as far as Calcutta in India before being advised that the remainder of the journey through Bangladesh and Burma would be risky. Not to be disheartened the trio decided to go even better and carry on to Australia by sea. However, there was an issue with one of their possessions which would not be accepted Down Under – namely a cobra and its basket previously purchased from a snake charmer in India - but the boys did the right thing and donated it to Calcutta Zoo.

After 12 months in Sydney Geoff didn't feel the urge to return home and early in 1963 took up a position as a Plantation Assistant in Papua New Guinea. The plantation grew Cocoa and Coconuts for processing and export from Rabaul in the Island of New Britain. Geoff was given his own house and ex US army Dodge truck as transport. The locals and workers spoke pidgin English and called him “Lik Lik Master” – little master. One of the many tasks he oversaw was the construction of bridges over ravines to allow the produce to be transported to the plantation drying and processing plants. Being the tropics the bridges had to be built to withstand torrential rain. For example, one storm delivered 19 inches of rain in just 24 hours and a recently built bridge didn't survive. Geoff realised that he wasn't cut out for Civil Engineering!

A promotion to Manager of another Plantation on the main island of New Guinea meant that Geoff spent another two and a half years in PNG. Having that position meant you were looked up to by those in your charge and had to turn your hand to any trade and profession required. Being remote and with sparse communication and transport links, one of these tasks was to be the Doctor, having been granted his medical practitioner certificate after two weeks intensive training at the Rabaul Central Hospital – without which you were not allowed to work on outstations. The only other option was the local Witch Doctor! More Engineering related tasks did crop up such as repairing tractor fuel injectors without any of the necessary tools. Geoff had to think on his feet as despite his college training telling him this could only be done by properly equipped workshops, these were few and far between in the jungle, and the nearest town was a twenty-mile boat trip across the bay, or a sixty-five-mile trek along coastal paths.

In December 1965 Geoff came home to England and had to decide where his future career lay. He had two opportunities – Assam, India or Coventry, England. At the same time, he married Ann and this led him to decide his future lay working at home at the Massey Ferguson training school, Stoneleigh. Demonstrating the then new 515 Combines all over the UK meant he could also give the MF design engineers an appreciation of the serviceability (or lack of) of their designs.

After three years at MF UK Geoff and Ann relocated to MF in Dublin for another three years and enjoyed the Irish hospitality and goodwill even though the Troubles were in their early days. The

Seventies saw Geoff working for a Consultancy with MF, New Holland, ICI and Fisons in the UK and overseas. He eventually moved to Wright Rain in 1978. Many will remember the drought of 1976 which was a great year for a company involved in Irrigation and the high potato price meant profits were good. Conversely though 1979, Geoff's first full year with the company, was a very wet year so this offset the gains made three years before. Geoff was promoted to Managing Director and set himself and the team the task of improving the product range and exporting more, including supplying large projects in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, as Jack Wright, the founder, had done in the fifties, sixties and early seventies. At the same time, a new demand for irrigation in the UK arose in the form of Golf Courses with many acres of agricultural land being developed for the leisure industry. The company had three specialist installation branches working continuously around the UK installing the systems to keep the Greens green, as well as large agricultural installation projects in agriculture, particularly large-scale potato, sugar beet and field vegetable enterprises.

The company was also heavily involved in slurry handling equipment and systems. In the early '80's the Farrow irrigation company was acquired from Tate and Lyle. With it came an experimental Digester Plant on a 5,000 head breeding sow herd on the Humber. The system includes a bank of six, six-cylinder diesel engines, converted to run on methane, powering a generation plant producing all the power needed by the farm. Unfortunately, the methane was destroying the big end bearings in the engines in about three months, and methane production stopped every time the farm had to treat the herd with antibiotics, which killed all the bacteria in the slurry tank. Sadly, after two years, this pioneering project was closed, there being no government support for this technology – the environment was not on politicians' agenda then!

In late 1988 asset strippers took control of Wright Rain and Geoff decided to move on. He joined Kidd Farm Machinery in Wiltshire as managing director. Kidd machinery was known for being well built and outlasting their competitor's offerings. Indeed, Archie Kidd was known for having taken on John Deere in a patent dispute and winning. Product development was key and new mower and feeder wagon ranges were produced, trialled and launched. A new venture saw the launch of a large capacity trailed combine harvester, developed in partnership with Shelbourne Reynolds and the NIAE at Wrest Park at Silsoe.

A further move to another Wolseley Group company, Parmiter, followed where chain harrows, disc harrows and disc ploughs were major products as the straw burning ban came into effect, and min-till was becoming an important arable system. Other products included the bale wrappers and the renowned shear grab and sheer bucket products ranges. The company was also involved in seed drills, which led to a development project with the Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, building a prototype "supersonic" seeder, which propelled seed into the ground at the speed of sound – a system that would revolutionise no-till arable systems. Sadly, the trials ended with no firm conclusions.

A background in both irrigation and agricultural machinery lead Geoff to move into sports turf equipment for the later stages of his career. He was involved in the development and world-wide marketing of the Dutch Redexim Group products including the Vertidrain aerators, corers, fine turf grass seeders, scarifiers, top dressers, laser graders, stone buriers, and a completely new range for the emerging synthetic turf markets.

Like all professionals who have served many years in Industry, Geoff was involved in many organisations outside of his 9 to 5. For 21 years he was a Governor of Lackham College and as chairman, was involved in the mergers with Trowbridge, Chippenham and Salisbury colleges to form the umbrella Wiltshire College. He also has a seat on the Board of the Grounds Management Association and was involved in the moving the Saltex show from Windsor to the NEC. Other

organisations included the Agricultural Engineers Association, the Royal Smithfield Club of which he is a trustee, and on the Board of the Royal Smithfield Show at Earls Court from 1985 until its last show in 2004.

An enjoyable evening was had by all in attendance and the Branch thank Geoff and Ann for their presentation.



