



## **Robert Woodthorpe Browne's Eulogy**

### **Given by his son, Robert Woodthorpe Browne**

"Good afternoon & thank you for being here – Barbara & I are really touched that so many of you have braved the strikes and the weather. Sorry we can't all fit in! But I have learned that you don't always get a huge choice in these matters.

"Robert Woodthorpe Browne - in ten minutes... I'll try!

"Born in 1943 in Hertfordshire Robert was the son of Robert (Buster) and Joan, and older brother to my uncle Simon. His father was a naval commander, and ships and the Navy was something that captured him throughout his life, no doubt because of this. It was Hornblower growing up, and we saw newfound joy as he discovered Patrick O'Brian's *Aubrey & Matruin* series as an adult. Ship models kept appearing at home following trips or visits, and Barbara would quietly roll her eyes – another one.

"My grandmother, a Scot, had grown up in Belgium and simplistically through this European background coupled with the Navy, my father's fondness for all things international was formed.

"Robert went to the then grammar school St. Ignatius College in South Tottenham, which was run by the Jesuits. The religious grounding and discipline for learning left its mark throughout his life. He said he could always tell when meeting other Jesuit educated men. As well as seeding his voracious appetite for learning, it also laid the platform for his successful career, and his roles on the various political, business, and charitable committees he sat on. He would say: "always tell the truth - might not be the whole truth, but if they don't ask, that's their fault" – Jesuit negotiation 101.

"This 'cunning' also translated into his personal life. I will always remember the 1<sup>st</sup> of April at home. You needed to be ON YOUR GUARD. He had me writing down orders for fish from a colleague in France, red herrings I think, for 20 minutes. I then called him in the office and relayed

my detailed notes – only for him to say 'Poisson D'Avril' as they say in French, or he had me tramping to Geneva airport, where he had colluded with Melissa to convince me that she was stranded. He stopped me before I left the village! I got him back on several occasions, and by my twenties, both on high alert, we reached stalemate and called it a draw.

“Robert left school with his A levels – he would get his degree later – and went straight into work beginning his career in re-insurance and his lifelong love affair with the City of London. But it wasn't all about London. He was attracted to the international nature of the job and he wanted to travel. As some of you know, he eventually ticked off 155 of the 193 UN member states. An incredible achievement and testament to his love of travel.

“Most notable at his young age were his trips to Zurich where he met his beloved Barbara. Now for those of you knew my father as a calculated and measured man, take a moment: he was 21, engaged within 3 months, and married a short while later in Barcelona, where he was then living. A different time!

“Robert and Barbara then moved to Mauritius and his work in international emerging markets really began. Africa and the Middle East would be his primary focus, and he dedicated much time and energy to developing local African insurance capabilities, much to the frustration of his British bosses who saw erosion of revenues. Undeterred, he helped found the African Insurance Organisation, an organisation dedicated to the African insurance industry. It was with great pride that he was received back in June 2022 in Nairobi as the VIP guest of honour, recognised as the founding father of the AIO, and fittingly gave the keynote address: *A Call For African Insurance Renaissance* – something he himself had pioneered half a century ago.

“With the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the opportunities of Russia and Central and Eastern Europe became his latest theatre of operations, as Western re-insurers sought to develop this latest emerging market. This was to be his last real corporate focus, latterly running his own brokerage with key clients with his friend and partner David Bridges.

“I should add that some of my friends always thought he was a British Spy. The amount of travel (he would be away 2 weeks out of 4 when I was young), and incidents such as getting shot at in Baghdad, arrested in the Congo for having a Dictaphone, and suspect Russian Visa queries, all added fuel to the fire. He would laugh it off, but I don't recall him ever denying it... I guess we'll never know.

“Behind the work was his other great passion – politics. I am delighted that we are joined by his friend Lord Allderdice to give this the airtime it deserves. For my part I leave you only with this. He was hooked from the age of 16. He was an idealist – not a politician for me – I still remember

when he was seeking to become Treasurer of the Liberal Democrats he was running against somebody else. He was confident he had the votes but he lost. He said, “so and so said they would vote for me, they didn’t, they stabbed me in the back!” I looked at him in his mature naivety and asked him “why are you so surprised? That’s politics, no?” He was somewhat crestfallen.

“Suffice to say his passion and commitment to UK & International politics ultimately led to one his proudest moments – receiving his MBE from Prince William, and a day at the Palace that Barbara, Melissa and I will always remember with great pride and fondness.

“Away from work and politics, there are several other parts of his life that I would like to share with you. I mentioned the City earlier, and this was a great love of Robert’s. A member of Lloyds of London for many years, the City was always the centre of his professional and civic life. We are delighted to be joined by members of the Worshipful Company of World Traders, where my father proudly served as Master in 2017. He embraced the company totally, both in Senior roles as well as a guide and mentor to junior members. He formed a fantastic relationship with his fellow masters, and was honoured to lead the social side for the Prime Masters, as they named themselves. They visited Bologna just this summer, a trip I know Robert and Barbara enjoyed immensely.

“But before the World Traders came many happy years with the Lime Street Ward Club, and it would remiss not to mention that today. He really enjoyed the Ward Club, and this indoctrinated him in City ways. Other bodies he was involved with also included the English Ceramics Circle, the Royal Forestry Society, the British German Association, and Royal Institute for International Affairs, otherwise known as Chatham House, where he served 2 terms on the Council. He was also thrilled by our ancestry and its links to Thomas Gresham, one of the City’s founding fathers, and Gresham College & Gresham Society. I think it was through this that he met his great friend Michael Mainelli, who I understand may just be the next Lord Mayor of London. This was friendship that he respected and cherished deeply, and he was so excited about what was to come – thinking of speeches, designing floats. He will be so cross he did not get to see it happen.

“Going back in time a bit, back to 1975, two things happened: I arrived, and my parents bought a small White Cottage in the hamlet of Broad Marston.

“For the next 40 years, this would be our home away from work and traveling. Robert, and especially Barbara, really put down roots, becoming part of a wonderful and colourful local community. This was where he indulged one passion: wine. Robert built a bar and wine store, and developed a new one. He learned to fly, earning his pilots’ license in Wellesborne near Stratford. Using most weekends to keep up his hours, he eventually would fly further afield going as far as the Alps on more than one occasion.

“The White Cottage was also the place for wonderful milestone parties. The first was Robert’s 40<sup>th</sup>, where we had people from all over the world fly in for a weekend of celebration and Morris Dancing. He loved the Morris dancers and would be out at dawn every May Day to serve them a dram as they danced up the sun. His 50<sup>th</sup> was similar but somewhat more refined. His 60<sup>th</sup> was totally different. He had bought the back field and planted the 21,000 trees of Browne’s Wood. A funfair was the order of the day complete with dodgems and fairground attractions.

“Coming back to the Jesuit cunning. My father applied at this time to the department of agriculture for grant, as he now considered himself to a farmer. “What do you farm sir?” asked the young man from the department. “Trees & Bees.” Barbara trained as a beekeeper, and we had two hives. “Well how many bees do you have?” “I am not sure” was his reply, “but you are most welcome to come and count them.” He got his grant.

“His 70<sup>th</sup> was marked with a wonderful family party in the room where he was born, in what is now Ashridge Management College. He would have been 80 next May and was planning another family party at the National Liberal Club, somewhere he was definitely a semi-permanent fixture. Family, watch this space.

“Talking of family, he took his role as Robert Browne extremely seriously. I have never truly known why, but it gave him a sense of identity and responsibility, and something he cared very much about. Whilst many of us get on with our busy lives, Robert and Barbara placed themselves at the centre of the extended Woodthorpe Browne nexus, ensuring news was shared, and we had a means of being brought together. Just this year, my parents spent time with cousins in South Africa, and with the power of WhatsApp we have all seen the photos and been able to keep up.

“Also this year, 2022 saw the completion of a very personal project. That of the restoration of the Robert Browne (& Elizabeth Woodthorpe) graves at St. Margaret’s in Lowestoft, where the Browne family emanates from. They were beautifully restored and we celebrated on a beautiful day in the Summer. One of my now most treasured pictures is of my father, me, and my son. Three generations of Robert Brownes together with our ancestors of old.

“He loved being a grandfather, and adored and was adored by Max and Emma who will miss him terribly. When we learned that they both had a genetic condition known as Tuberos Sclerosis, unprompted, he became involved with the [Tuberos Sclerosis Association](#), eventually serving as deputy chair. He did this solely for them, and this gives a small insight in the kind and giving man he was. If you are minded to make a memorial donation, the TSA details are available on the back of the order of service, and I know this would have meant the world to him.

“And lastly who was he? He was smart, intelligent, learned. I could speak to him for 30 minutes and have a full briefing on world affairs that had me sound fluent on matters of the world stage. He was warm, generous and funny. He loved language (he spoke 7 or 8 of them) and word play, and dreadful puns, something he shares with his brother. He was a wonderful host, and sometimes terrible guest. He was susceptible to flattery (as many a salesman would benefit from), a part-time hypochondriac, but a charmer and an entertainer, with a story for most occasions – they weren’t always suitable. He was a reinsurance broker, a politician, a historian, a Master, a Patron, a board director, a chairman, a trustee, a wine buff, a theatre angel, a property developer, a pilot, an amateur collector, a Tottenham Hotspur fan, a son, a brother, a grandfather, a husband, and my dad – I will miss him greatly.

“A final word as we pause for the reflection song. I was raised a Catholic, and every Sunday we went to Mass. Our favourite church was called the Shottery near Stratford. It was quite modern, but they had a wonderful choir who always had separate songs during Communion and the collection. We always managed to get a copy of their music sheets so we could sing along with them, and *How Great Thou Art* was our very favourite Hymn. I found a version by none other than Elvis, whom my father quite liked back in the day. This is a truly personal indulgence. Thank you.”