

John Bernard Sunley
31st May 1936 - 14th February 2011

John B Sunley, one of the founding Trustees of the Bernard Sunley Charitable Foundation, and its Chairman since 1989, died peacefully after a short illness on 14 February 2011. John lived at Godmersham near Canterbury for many years with his wife Fiona and his two younger children, and was High Sheriff of Kent 1999 – 2000.

The Foundation was established by his father, Bernard Sunley in 1960 with a pledge of £300,000 worth of shares in his property company. 50 years later, John was instrumental in commissioning a Jubilee Celebration 1960-2010 book recording the achievements of the £80m Foundation, which to date has made grants of over £92m to a very wide range of charities. John was passionate about the Foundation's ability to help improve quality of life, particularly amongst the young, the elderly and the disadvantaged. He was a Trustee of the Turner Contemporary Trust at Margate, a past President of Kent Association for the Blind, and a vice President of Kent Wildlife Trust. He was a tremendous supporter of many Kent charities including The Prince's Trust, Demelza House Children's Hospice and The Kent Air Ambulance Trust. There are a host of past projects across the country that carry the 'Sunley' name in schools, colleges, community centres, hospitals, and centres of art, perhaps the most notable being the 'Sunley Room' at the National Gallery, in which three exhibitions are staged each year. Other charities like Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, the Children's Trust at Tadworth, London Youth, YMCA, Scouts, Sea Cadets, and the Variety Club Sunshine Coaches benefited from his patronage aimed at children to give them the best possible start in life. Another theme was the importance of having a focus for a community: over the last 50 years literally hundreds of village halls have received assistance in updating and upgrading their facilities to present day standards to achieve this need, transforming the lives of a great many people.

Known as 'Sunshine' to his friends, John Sunley was educated at Elstree and Harrow Schools, before securing a business degree in the USA at Columbia University. He then served with the Royal Marines from 1954-56. He completed his work apprenticeship with Allan Charlesworth accountants and Weatherall Green and Smith Chartered Surveyors, where he met his first wife, Patricia, with whom he had four children.

In 1960 John joined the Boards of Blackwood Hodge Ltd and the Bernard Sunley Investment Trust (BSIT), the two public companies his father had built up since Bernard started as a landscape contractor in the 1920s (including re-laying the Arsenal FC Highbury pitch) before diversifying into open cast coal mining, airfield excavation and construction- Sunley built more than 100 bomber and fighter aerodromes during the Second World War.

Blackwood Hodge was the world's largest distributor of earthmoving equipment, notably Euclid, whilst the BSIT construction subsidiary Bernard Sunley & Sons became a household name responsible for such landmark buildings as Manchester's

Piccadilly Plaza, the Horseferry Road Government Buildings (“The 3 Graces”), the Gatwick Airport Terminal, and the Royal Thames Yacht Club.

During the seventies John spearheaded the Sunley move into the Middle East with notable success. Hospitals, police stations, banks, communication centres, and residential blocks were built throughout the Gulf States and in 1979 the Queen opened the Dubai World Trade Centre, simultaneously awarding the company Her Award for Export Achievement.

At home, John expanded the house building estates, consolidated the office investment portfolio and embarked on a number of audacious residential and commercial trading deals including the Legal & General, the Josephine Estate and PECU portfolios.

After Eagle Star acquired BSIT in 1979, John’s business attention crossed the Atlantic where profits from successful projects in New York and Boston were converted in 1987 into the opening of the internationally renowned Lake Nona Golf Club, Orlando. John was a member of the Worshipful Company of Paviers, a Freeman of the City of London, a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Building, and a very proud Life President of The Construction Industry Golfing Society.

John Sunley never retired and continued to manage the family property, farming and venture capital interests until the week before he died.

John’s hobbies were extensive and varied. Master of the Pytchley Hunt in the early 1990s, he was a Life Member of the Marylebone Cricket Club and Kent County Cricket Clubs, and an enthusiastic participant of The St Moritz Tobogganing and Royal Thames Yacht Clubs. Usually sporting a Panama or broad brimmed flat cap, John was a familiar and welcome figure on the racecourse, rarely missing a Monday evening meeting at Windsor; he took special delight whenever one of his home bred horses found their way into the Winners’ Enclosure whether it be Royal Ascot or Folkestone. The greyhound world also enjoyed his patronage, Sunley Express finishing 3rd in the Derby in 1986.

Perhaps his favourite sporting home was the golf course where off a competitive handicap he could conjure up all manner of matches. Members of Royal St Georges, Royal Cinque Ports, Sunningdale, The Berkshire, and the Royal and Ancient were frequently bemused to win matches only to owe “Sunshine” the spoils.

In his youth, John was a talented cricketer and rugby player; and up until very recently played a strategic game of tennis.

He managed to combine his charitable and sporting interests at the Lord’s Taverners and The Saints & Sinners Clubs of London, whilst at the same time adding to his extensive array of friends for whom he would do anything. John never took himself too seriously, and his generosity was legendary, as was his mischievous schoolboy sense of humour.

John was a countryman at heart and the beautiful Godmersham Park Estate, with its fine shoot and first class stud, is a fitting testament to his love of conservation and wildlife. Bees, chickens, butterflies and hares have all thrived in the Godmersham countryside.

John's passing leaves a huge void in his close-knit family, in his local Kent community, in the charitable and property worlds, and amongst his numerous friends and colleagues. He will be sorely missed and is survived by his wife Fiona, and six children.

3rd March 2011

