

Michael Amps

Over the years people have often said to me "there are no characters left in Oundle these days". I'm sure that's not right. I can think of quite a few – some of whom are here today! Michael Amps would certainly be on my list of Oundle characters. In recent years you may have been walking through town, quietly minding your own business when suddenly you had to take evasive action as a scooter, driven by a man in green shades, sped towards you. He would either be wearing a Saints shirt or an Amps sweatshirt adorned with the words: "Chairman Retired: still poking my nose in". Oundle will certainly be less colourful without Michael.

Michael would greet many of Oundle's retirees with words to suit their former occupation: "How's the old Dentist?" he would say. To which the reply was probably: "Fine Michael. How's the old grocer?" He would chat to anyone and everyone, about his aches and pains, his lack of balance and mobility ... before moving onto the latest Saints score, or the state of the test match.

Sport dominated Michael's life: In Michael's military service, his Commission had everything to do with the fact that the army wanted him to be available to play cricket and rugby. He played rugby for Northampton Saints RFC and Kettering whilst touring with Coventry and the army. He was in his own words a centre who could run a bit! Cricket was his summer sport. As a school boy he was a prolific run scorer. He later played for Northampton Saints Cricket Club, Oundle, Kettering, Northants Amateurs and any touring team who would have him along with his caravan. He was proud to tell any grandchild that he played for Northamptonshire seconds as a 16 year old at Edgbaston. But he never did divulge how many runs he scored. At the age of 60 Michael took up kick boxing. He would go to the gym three times a week to train. As he got older he became the man to hold the pads for all the youngsters and got a great pleasure from seeing them improve.

It is probably fair to say that Michael was always better playing sport than watching sport. Whilst watching the cricket at Milton Road, he ran into Mike Taylor. Northampton Saints were playing Oundle Town. Mike commented he had a conflict of interests: being a life member of Northampton Hockey and an Oundle resident. Michael suggested that his own situation was far worse as he had captained both sides!

Once Michael's sporting days slowed he turned his full attention to the Masons. A Masonic meeting would take priority over everything including his grandchildren and his business. It was amazing how quickly Michael's delivery round could be done if he had a masonic meeting. Michael rose through the ranks of various Lodges, up to Provincial Grand lodge of both Staffordshire and Northamptonshire and in 1995 was appointed to Grand Lodge. Michael was incredibly proud of his Masonic achievements and was a member of many lodges (including being a founder member of the Webb Ellis Lodge). However, the only Masonic meeting that Michael attended in 2014/15 was to collect his 60 year service certificate. It was proudly displayed at home for all to see.

When Michael chaired meetings (whatever that meeting may have been) they were enjoyable, focused, always accompanied by a glass of wine and most importantly they were short. Meetings should never exceed 30 minutes but if they did cross over into the second half hour another bottle must be opened. Having said that, Michael loved to chat. He would chat about Oundle, Oundle events and Oundle people. If you ever got caught by Michael in Amps car park (and I can see some of you did) he would sit on the garden wall and put the world to rights. It would be half an hour before you managed to walk the few yards to the wine shop.

Phone calls at meal times were also legendary and unhurried. Once he had eaten his main course the phone calls would start. He would always answer the phone, even if he had a table full of guests. The conversation would always follow the same format. "I have just had my dinner: meat from 'Seven Wells' and veg from the garden. Similarly, breakfast conversations went along the

lines of "toast with my home made marmalade!" Then the latest activities of the grand children would be shared. Michael loved his vegetable garden. He dispensed his excess veg to anybody and everybody. The famous wicker basket was often left in the shop for the staff to help themselves. But his favourite veg - the asparagus and broad beans - were never knowingly shared. Most years he had a trailer full of manure delivered for his garden. "Uncle Herbert always did and so I do!" Then for the next few weeks Michael would be seen spreading the muck in his scruffy old Saints shirt. He wasn't one for growing flowers: "If I can't eat it, I don't grow it"

I was recently having a haircut in Northampton. During the conversation the chap cutting my hair told me that he buys all his wine from Amps Fine Wines in Oundle. "Do you know it?" he asked. Just a bit. Michael and his mother Annie developed the business after Percy's death. They became one of the first grocers to go Self Service. They then introduced the mobile shop to cover the outlying villages. In 1955 Michael purchased 10 Market Place, and opened a Fish and Chip shop. On the opening night it took them until 10.30pm to clear the queue! The Fish and Chip shop was sold on and is still hugely successful today. Amps's shop continued to develop successfully and in 1982 Philip joined the business. Michael suggested he ought to get a knowledge of wine as it would become more important to the business in future years! Prophetic words. The grocery business closed in 1993 with the arrival of two supermarkets. But the wine business continued to grow to become one of the UK's leading Independent Wine Merchants.

All of you will know that Michael loved New Zealand. He could not have been prouder of the fact that twice Amps were the UK's NZ wine merchant of the year. At the Masonic Lodges bets were taken as to how quickly he would mention NZ in his speeches. In fact, eventually they started fining him at meetings for mentioning NZ. He was once asked whether he would emigrate to NZ. "No. I love visiting NZ but Oundle is where I live and where I will stay." Michael loved Oundle. He always said that he knew he was home when he saw the spire of St Peter's.

Anybody who lives in a house called Navarac has to be a Caravan enthusiast. Whilst playing cricket he would park the Caravan on the boundary and dispense tea, coffee, beer and wine to his team mates ... but mainly beer and wine! Michael's caravanning lead to his involvement with the Naturist movement and he was made Chairman of Europe's largest Naturist Society. Michael would often answer the door stark naked and happily chat for five minutes without a stitch on!

Michael was a surprisingly emotional man. At his numerous parties he would stand up to speak, only to be overcome with emotion. Before leaving for NZ he would be in floods of tears. He would always phone when he arrived in NZ, but would have to pass the phone to Shelly as he would be unable to get anymore words out. Michael was immensely proud of his children and grandchildren. The grandchildren were recorded by numbers the first born being number one and the most recent twins being born in NZ were numbers 11 and 12.

For years Michael was Chairman of the Friends of St Peter's Church. His meetings were characteristically brisk and always lubricated with wine. He loved this church. It made a great setting for wine tastings! Michael would have been so pleased to have seen this stage at the front of church once again. He thoroughly approved of the annual production that brought so many local children into church. The staging was also often used for Michael's Wine, Cheese and Jazz evening that contributed so much to the life of the church ... not to mention the Friend's funds.

Michael attended the traditional 8am Communion service. Michael would always come in his Saints' shirt and would discuss the lads' latest exploits before and after the service. At the 8am service Michael would always listen carefully (even to my drivel) and would generously laugh in all the right places! He loved the new automatically opening glass doors and the ramp at the main door. He was the first person to test drive it in his scooter. Even at Michael's rapid pace the sharp

right hand turn was possible. For the first time Michael could drive all the way to the chancel. But Michael's faith was more than a beautiful building.

At the 8am service time stands still. It is the old 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The language of the old prayer book reflects its 1549 roots. They were tough times. The marriage service refers to "the carnal lusts and desires of the flesh ... like brute beasts of the field that have no understanding." Not exactly romantic. And the ancient Litany contains the plea for God to "save us from sudden death". In truth most of us would opt for sudden death. But Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the author of much of the Prayer Book, had other priorities. He was saying: Give us time, Lord; time to prepare for death; time to put things right with our friends and family; time to put things right with you, Lord.

Michael heard for many years about the God of grace ... the God who loves us unconditionally ... the God who reaches out to include us, not to exclude us ... the God who, in Jesus, gives his life so that we can live ... the God of new beginnings ... the God who says "I have your name written on the palm of my hand" ... the God who says "I know my sheep and no one can take them from my hand". Michael has sat in this church and enjoyed the presence of this extraordinary God for many, many years.

Yes, today is a real mix of emotions. We rejoice and we grieve. But the Bible reminds us that we don't grieve as those who have no hope. We have every hope. Jesus says: I am the resurrection and the life ... I will never turn away anyone who comes to me. A promise to you. A promise to me. A promise to Michael.

Towards the end of this service we will be using a Masonic prayer that would have been very familiar to Michael. The prayer refers to God as the Mighty Architect. When we say this prayer, remember that this Mighty Architect is the one who, in Jesus, designs and builds a bridge wide enough for all of us to cross. Through his death Jesus opens a way into the very presence of God –for you, for me, for Michael.

Thanks be to God.