

Kenneth George (Ken) Aldous¹

Early years. Ken was born June 10, 1920 and raised in the village of Maisemore, just outside Gloucester. His father George worked as an -engineers draughtsman for Marvin and Wright whose main business was installing and repairing boat engines, but his talents extended to wiring village houses when electricity first came to the village. Ken enjoyed telling stories of childhood life (e.g. chasing a ram into a pond, where it drowned, and getting severely punished) and always viewed himself as a country boy at heart. In particular the village primary school had an extensive program training children to run small agricultural holdings – they grew produce and raised chickens and pigs. For the rest of his life Ken’s main recreation was ”edible gardening”, growing vegetables and later fruit.

Around 1932-3 he spent some months staying with a maiden aunt in Weston-Super-Mare for medical reasons, occupying his time by walking the beach. In the typescript Ken writes ”continuous sore throat” and implies that the walking was on medical advice; in his stories it was convalescence from scarlet fever, and he was playing truant in that the aunt was unclear on the concept that children were supposed to enroll in school!

He subsequently attended Sir Thomas Rich’s Grammar School in Gloucester. He writes ”I enjoyed maths, chemistry and physics, games - boxing and soccer - usually captain from 14 - but was useless writing or understanding history and French/Latin so simply sat back and enjoyed myself fishing, playing football and cricket outside school”. He was determined, against his father’s wishes, to leave when he reached age 16. He writes ”On 9th June 1936 I read about a job going as a Laboratory Assistant at Gloucester Farmers Dairy, applied for it and obtained the job because I could start next day on my birthday, 10th June.” Apparently there was a new law requiring a small laboratory to check the food products were up to a health standard, nobody available knew anything about it, so Ken was told to go to a Reference Library to learn how to set up a Lab, and then do it!

(I (David) like to tell this story to young people, my point being that nowadays few 16-year-olds would have such initiative).

During World War 2 he was accepted to train to fly in the Fleet Air Arm, but quickly was pulled out and assigned to learn radar repair (presumably, by military logic, because he had once worked in a Lab. Ken’s inference later was that the life expectancy of flight crew was so low that they didn’t want to lose anyone with another useful skill.) During training he met Joyce, and though they were never subsequently based together, they were married on June 4, 1945. Ken claimed – I never knew how seriously, but it fit his practical nature – they chose to marry at that particular time in anticipation of the invasion of Japan with massive casualties, so that Joyce would at least get a widow’s pension if he were killed.

After living with Ken’s parents and working as a farmhand for a year, in September 1946 he started at the North of Scotland Agricultural College, Aberdeen, and finished in 1949 with Diplomas in Agriculture, Dairying and Technology. During this period Ken worked odd jobs in food and agriculture, and Joyce worked odd jobs including housekeeper.

¹Written by sons David and Robert, summer 2012, based on their memories and on a 40 page typescript by Ken himself. That was apparently written in 2006, and focuses largely on his work life.

Family and Hammett's - Bovril career. After brief jobs in Norwich he started work at Hammett's Dairies, Exeter in October 1950 (just after son Robert was born; son David was born there in 1952). There he met John Sharples, who became a long time colleague and friend. A major task for the business was to replace the outdated and bomb-damaged milk bottling plant near the city center. Ken (whose Lab experience had evidently placed him on the "technology" side of the business) was made responsible for deciding on what equipment to buy and install, and as he writes "We produced the first completely automated bottling, crating and uncrating; stacking and unstacking plant in the world - 400 bottles per minute." The new factory opened in 1956. Around that time Ken and John Sharples were made joint General Managers of the business, John on the financial side and Ken on the operations side.

As children, Robert and I had no direct connection with father's business, though I do remember being taken one Christmas morning into the bottling plant, which of course was still running albeit with minimal staff. This I later realized was typical of Ken as a conscientious boss, to show support for the employees who had to work on Christmas.

By around 1960 Bovril had taken over Hammett's, and Ken's managerial talents were recognized. During the 1960s he moved up the corporate ladder, and eventually (around 1970) became a Director of Bovril. All that decade involved extensive hard work, travel and stress.

Bovril was a British icon, perhaps with the virtues and defects of Victorian Britain. The chairman was Lord Luke, whose Wikipedia entry [Ian Lawson Johnston, 2nd Baron Luke] portrays him as a paragon 20th century aristocrat-businessman-philanthropist; his brother, the Hon. Hugh Lawson Johnston, was deputy chairman and managing director, and Lord Tweedsmuir (another of Lord Lukes relatives I believe) was a non-executive director. The prelude to Lord Lukes one visit to the family home was one of the very few times I recall seeing Joyce flustered.

As regards philanthropy, I remember Ken complaining that the local hospital not infrequently used to phone up Hammetts dairy and ask for a few pints of milk with specific allergens removed this took a skilled chemist several hours to do, but the hospital would only pay the price for regular milk. Nevertheless, Ken said the chairman insisted the dairy had to comply with the hospitals requests. In later life, Ken kept in touch with Hugh Lawson Johnston who visited Ken and Joyce several times when they lived in Feock.

Regarding family life, Ken and Joyce had their first foreign holiday with their sons in Sweden and Norway in 1959 or thereabouts. Around 1962 a caravan was purchased, and used both for family summer vacations on the continent (first to the South of France, later also Italy and the Pyrenees) and for weekend trips, primarily to get Ken away from the stress of the job.

To the children, as teenagers attending Exeter School, it then seemed just ordinary middle class life. From today's viewpoint it was on the one hand very stable and secure (Joyce as homemaker; the children (school was very close) and often Ken had lunch at home every day, which is surely inconceivable nowadays); on the other hand the children were deemed responsible to enjoy their own free time without 24/7 parental supervision.

So as the 60s progressed the family acquired an upper middle class income and some of the associated trappings (a nice house, the Rover 2000, sons destined for Oxford and Cambridge) though with few exceptions (a taste for wine and a dalliance with fly fishing) Ken remained comparatively true to his countryside roots.

In summer 1969 David finished at Exeter School and thereafter (though the boys returned for summer break for a few years) Ken and Joyce were living alone.

Empty nest (1970+). Ken's life was changed by two dramatic events in 1971. After a routine medical exam showed a possible problem, it was found that an artery in his kidney had been penetrated and then hemorrhaged. Ken was in severe pain in hospital for a couple of weeks, then in bed for the next 3 months at home, but seemed to recover. Just after he returned to work came the second event. Bovril was taken over by Cavenham Foods, which was Jimmy Goldsmith's vehicle for buying and asset stripping undervalued companies, of which Bovril was the prime example. The bland Wikipedia account ("After Luke's retirement, the company was sold to Cavenham, owned by James Goldsmith") is enlivened in Ken's typescript with a description of what really happened. Goldsmith told Luke and all the directors except Ken to resign immediately, which they did, but Ken was retained for another 6 months. Ken doesn't suggest any reason – perhaps they simply wanted to retain someone senior on the "operations" side who knew how things actually worked.

Ken quickly put his business acumen to good use in 1972 by buying and managing a dairy (retail daily delivery of milk and dairy products to homes and businesses) in Truro, that town chosen because there were no national companies operating similar dairies. Over the next two years he amalgamated this with two similar independent dairies, together making up 80% of the retail milk delivery business in Truro, at which point (1974) the combined business was sold to a large company (CWS) for a reasonable profit. During 1976-80 he set up a novel scheme for using milk powder as calf feed, doing much of the labor himself, but this eventually proved too much physical effort. During this period he also started, and continued until his death, a relationship with a local firm called Hirst Magnetics, which makes magnetizers and instruments for measuring magnetic fields.

Regarding personal life: They had bought a house in Feock, near Truro, whose small back garden backed onto a field owned by an elderly farmer. Ken soon persuaded the farmer to sell him an adjacent piece of the field which now became a large (3/4 acre) area where Ken could indulge his love of gardening. Part was fruit trees over grass, the rest was vegetables. Ken claimed that he grew everything except main crop potatoes that could be grown in the climate. Even a cranberry bog! And only Ken would have built two adjacent concrete bunkers almost the size of squash courts for his compost (one for new material to be thrown on, the other having matured for use).

Mowing was via a small red lawn tractor, later much beloved by the grandsons.

Ken and Joyce continued to be enthusiastic travelers. In 1974 they toured the U.S. in their own car and caravan, shipped with them on a Russian boat from Tilbury to New York. In 1981 they toured again, this time buying and selling a camper in the U.S.

Ken's kidney issue had been handled via a low protein diet and medicine, but in 1982 he needed to go onto dialysis. Ken persuaded the NHS to install a dialysis machine in their home (a spare bedroom was converted) because it could then be used by holidaymakers too. He later went onto the waiting list for a kidney transplant, and was fortunate to receive one in 1993. The operation was a success, and Ken claimed that on check-up visits to the hospital the doctor would point him out, to younger people waiting for a transplant, as an exemplar of life after transplant.

To be near Robert's family and near to medical facilities, and because the garden became too much to handle, in 1999 they moved to Colwall, which was to be their home for the rest of their lives.

Joyce joined the local Womens Institute and was treasurer for several years. Ken joined Probus, an association of retired professional and business people. They made a few friends in Colwall but didnt have the large circle of friends they had previously had in Devon and Cornwall. Their bungalow had a small but very pretty rear garden which required considerable effort to keep looking nice. In about 2004 Ken had most of the rear garden paved to reduce maintenance, but he still kept a border for growing a few vegetables and fruit trees, and he made sure the front lawn was immaculate.

Ken and Joyce celebrated their 60'th wedding anniversary in June 2005 with a party in their garden with many family and friends, and a congratulatory card from the Queen.

Though Ken remained physically and mentally fit into his early 80s, by the end of 2005 he was having difficulty in driving any distance, and for the last two years of life his physical and mental health steadily declined. He remained at home with Joyce. Robert's wife Hilary, and later nurses, visited daily to take care of them both, until Ken's death on July 15, 2008, at age 88.

Ken was always the most outgoing member of the family, and would happily strike up a conversation with anyone – in later years, perhaps talking longer than the other party might wish.

Ken and Joyce were devoted to each other, and their marriage was surely as happy and fulfilling as any real-world marriage could be.