

## **An appreciation of John Douglas, 21<sup>st</sup> Earl of Morton**

How delighted and touched I was to be asked by the family to speak today for John, a man of outstanding character, ability and charm, whom I so much admired and his family, so many friends and I will so greatly miss.

John Charles Sholto Douglas was born at Lyndhurst in the New Forest on the 19<sup>th</sup> March 1927, the only child of Charles Douglas, who was the second son of the 19<sup>th</sup> Earl of Morton and a Captain in the Royal Navy, and of his second wife, Florence Timson, who was a nurse. John had two older step-siblings, the children of his father's first wife – Alice Fox-Pitt – who had died in 1924 soon after giving birth to John's stepbrother (subsequently killed aged only 19 in Italy in 1943).

John's early life was spent at both the family farm in Malmesbury and in Scotland where his father, in a somewhat gentlemanly manner, was by then factoring the Douglas family estates for the 20<sup>th</sup> Earl. Sheila's first sighting of young John was in fact at a children's party in Gloucestershire soon after his return from Scotland; she enquired of the young seven year old standing self-consciously in his kilt whether he owned a pair of trousers.

John exhausted the patience of two English Public Schools before settling happily at the local secondary school in Malmesbury where his singular character and drive was better understood by its caring and perceptive Headmaster, who never doubted John would make something of his life.

What that something was, in the first instance, was simply to earn his keep. He recognised early on that most of the grown-ups around him were living blissfully beyond their means, in what he called "the land of can't afford it", hunting with the Beaufort all winter, playing polo at Down Farm and Norton all summer, spending money, rather than thinking about earning it.

John began work on the family's dairy farm, milking by hand, and established quickly what became a lifelong knowledge of, and sympathy and eye for, livestock. At the same time, barely out of his teens, he started a transport business, eventually running three lorries, supplying gravel for the construction of a nearby aerodrome. He had driven from a young age, honing his skills ferrying the inebriated local vet on his rounds, and he drove one of the lorries himself with great energy and gusto; he always remembered taking on, as a spare driver, a young man with a great destiny ahead in earth moving, one Joe Bamford, the eponymous JCB. John also boxed in his spare time as well as steeplechasing and point-to-pointing, riding successfully for a Dorset butcher who always had a few good horses. He was a highly competent, tough, outdoor young man, already what we would call today, street-wise.

Amongst the eligible young bloods and swells of Gloucestershire, John, therefore, cut a distinctive and unusual figure. He led a very different sort of existence from his conventionally educated contemporaries who had little conception of the life and people John experienced and encountered driving lorries. A young Sheila Gibbs though had been keeping an eye on him since that first encounter with the kilted seven year old and that very difference from other boys was starting to make a big impression. When her parents began to see which way her affections were tending, they

were concerned. "The only person she likes" the Reverend John Gibbs darkly confided to other family members "is THAT John Douglas". But she was not to be denied and her choice of John over all those other Oxbridge dilettantes was to be gloriously vindicated in the years to come with a lifetime of happiness and terrific success for John in so many aspects of life, and in that success he could not have received greater support from Sheila.

They were each 22 when they married at St John Baptist Church at Shipton Moyne in 1949. John, while continuing to run the family farm, bought another, Lukers, at Brinkworth, where they moved for the first years of their marriage and where Mary was born. There was no business opportunity John was not alive to: dealing in livestock, driving lorries, sometimes disappearing off to London to places like Elephant & Castle in, as Sheila remembers, his Jaeger coat, often with its pockets stuffed with banknotes and sometimes even with a revolver.

To say he led a colourful life for a young married man would be an understatement.

He and Sheila once returned to Wiltshire from a brief holiday at the Douglas Highland Estate at Conaglen to find the local Constable with a warrant for his arrest and immediate transfer back to the Fort William jail to await trial for criminal damage to the Conaglen sawmill. In fact he was guilty as charged, having deliberately disabled the Mill after discovering illegal logging on the Estate. He initially informed the Constable he couldn't possibly be arrested as he had the milking to do; he then quickly put in a call to the legendary local solicitor, Mr Dale of Wootton Bassett, who quickly talked the Constable out of apprehending young Douglas. John always remembered that the Constable was in such awe of Mr Dale that he took off his helmet in respect when he picked up the phone to speak to him.

And, in fact, the family lands in Scotland were now beginning to call to them. Lacking real attention and a proper business approach, they were an attraction and an opportunity to John. Soon after Stewart was born in 1952, Sheila's father died, and they decided to go, taking a tenancy of one of the Dalmahoy Estate farms at Warriston, where Jamie and Anne now live. The rest of the Dalmahoy Estate was generally thought to be beyond their reach, impenetrably tied up in an old Estate Trust. But John was never one to take NO for an answer and he began, with the assistance of Michael Lorimer, an epic 15 year battle in the Scottish Courts to unlock them, which was to culminate in success in 1968 when the Court of Session here in Edinburgh found in his favour and allowed him to buy out his cousin and take over all the Dalmahoy Farms. John and Sheila lived first at Old Hatton Mains which having electricity, was, after two years of candles in Wiltshire, the lap of luxury, plus the convenience of a bus stop outside the door for the children's schools. Jamie was born there in 1954.

So the farming years at Dalmahoy began. For someone with such a love of the land and livestock John had truly come into his kingdom. He gradually expanded the farming operation, and all his energies and resources were to that end. When Sheila's mother died in 1966 her inheritance went quickly and profitably into building cattle sheds.

These were the years he dealt widely in cattle up, down and across these Islands. And he was never happier than when dealing in stock and attending markets and auctions. He was at the Edinburgh market every Wednesday, taking his lunch in the Corn Exchange, and unfailingly also at Lanark every Monday. In his early years at Lanark he couldn't help noticing that that the drivers who chauffeured

the big Cattle Buyers to the sales got a free feed at the back of the Mart Café and, never one to miss an opportunity, John acquired a chauffeur's hat and donning it followed the drivers in the side entrance to get his lunch.

Another irresistible pleasure for John was the implement sale at Lanark the last Thursday of every month and the family began to look out with increasing dread as the hour of his return beckoned, fearful of what bargain he couldn't resist this time. This could be anything from an old banger to a 100 remaindered Army Surplus shirts. He could turn a penny with anything; Stewart remembers an old lorry bought on Thursday paying for two loads of hay at the weekend. I myself fell foul of one of his sales initiatives one evening at polo when he persuaded me I HAD to have some horrible looking grey green shirts emblazoned with the logo of some long forgotten Land Rover advertising promotion. I felt lucky to have got out alive when driving home with only three of them – never worn one of them from that day to this.

He travelled far and wide to markets. A touching letter to the family after his death from Harrison & Hetherington, the auctioneers, recalled the 60 years he had been coming to the Newcastleton Mart to buy blue grey heifers.

The letter spoke also of his friendship and rapport with all the local farmers and this points not only to his great charm, but also his total absence of airs and graces. He could talk to anyone and make friends of anyone and enjoy doing so. He was never the 21<sup>st</sup> Earl of Morton at the Mart, he was John Douglas, Cattle Dealer, and a most admired and very formidable one at that.

My daughter eventually became a vet at the George practice in Malmesbury, well known to John, and a few years back sitting at her desk one day the receptionist rang and in a whispered voice said "there are two men here to see you, they LOOK like farmers but they SAY they are the Earl of Morton and Lord Aberdour". John liked that story. In humility and by inclination he was a farmer before he was an Earl.

But he was a man of so many parts, and, as we have seen, many hats, and he never wore more hats than when the family took over the Dalmahoy Golf Club in 1978. The house and course had been on a long lease to the Golf Club since 1927 and included the most basic masculine bachelor accommodation – 6 baths in a row in one bathroom – but John and Sheila decided to take it back, modernise it and make a go of it themselves and, over 12 years, they hosted a number of high class golf tournaments at the Club playing host to the likes of Acker Bilk, Jimmy Tarbuck, Telly Savalas, Bruce Forsyth and Bing Crosby. Of course they always meant to get a manager but hands-off was not John's style and it never happened and they ran it themselves. They couldn't always keep a chef or waiter either and it was not unusual for the by now 21<sup>st</sup> Earl of Morton to take a customer's order, pass through the kitchen door, don a chef's hat and cook the man's steak; equally it was not unusual for a curmudgeonly guest subsequently to complain that his steak wasn't up to scratch and ask to see the manager, at which point John would discard his chef's garb, climb into a sports jacket and emerge, spruce and soothing, by another door to confront the dissatisfied punter!

Eventually John decided the family's hoteling days were over and in 1988 he drove a typically hard bargain with Whitbread who took over the House and course on a long lease. It was just another deal for John and, as always, he relished it: bluegrey breeders at Newcastleton, Rocco Forte,

Whitbread and the big brewers, it didn't matter who they were, John was a formidable negotiator with them all. Another notable figure to become well aware of that skill was James Dyson, vacuum cleaner inventor and entrepreneur, who gradually bought, over many years, much of the family farm in Malmesbury for his expanding factory. John relished the various negotiations with Dyson, and the related battles with planners and councillors. The latter once disparagingly referred to a Scottish peer daring to interfere with local Wiltshire affairs only to be reminded by John that he was in fact a distinguished alumnus of Malmesbury Secondary School. James Dyson had the family to lunch in Malmesbury at the end of the long years of their dealings together and confirmed that John had been one of the toughest men with whom he had ever done business, tough but fair: John was proud of that assessment.

John had succeeded his cousin in 1976 to the earldom of Morton, a title created in the 1450s for a family prominent in the Borders since the late 1100s, and he became a crossbench peer, taken under the wing of Lord Weatherill and, with the latter's encouragement, interested himself in prisons and prisoner welfare. His own turbulent youth and education had left him with a lifelong sympathy for those in trouble or those who had been failed in some way by life or society. He served as Lord Lieutenant of West Lothian from 1985 for a remarkable 17 years, operating a rather different regime to his predecessor. Rarely can Kipling's words have found a more suitable subject: John really could walk with Kings and not lose the common touch, and was a calming, friendly presence to many overawed by royal and formal occasions. In fact he relished the contact with ordinary people far above the pomp and circumstance.

But it was not all commerce and duty. Horses had been a continuing thread in John and Sheila's lives since childhood. After the glorious years of hunting with the Beaufort, they never quite settled to the same pursuit in Scotland and looked about for other diversions.

Although John had two generations of polo players in his pedigree, in India and beyond, and it had also been an enthusiasm in Sheila's family (who were close friends of Gerald Balding, England's last 10 goal player), neither of them had any direct experience of polo and effectively began to play the game from scratch. John first started playing in 1969 when he resurrected the Edinburgh Polo Club – dormant since the original club sold its grounds at Murrayfield in the 1920s – with the help of Mervyn Fox-Pitt. A ground was laid out - by eye and tractor rather than laser – at Dalmahoy in what JNP Watson once described as 'Arcadian Splendour' and play began, country polo at its best – no goalposts, just coats – learning as they went along. Sheila resisted to start with – her great passion in youth had been hunter trails - but she joined what was increasingly becoming an all family enthusiasm in the late 1970's.

The enthusiasm for polo was so great that John began to become frustrated at the long months of no play over the endless Scottish winter. He visited the UK's first polo Arena, built by Bryan Morrison in Berkshire. He was informed an Arena cost £72,000 to build professionally; he paid no attention to that and returned to Dalmahoy, identified a bit of ground beyond the stables, and told Jamie to get some hardcore, wood and wire and get building!

Anyone who has been to Dalmahoy for polo, on grass or gravel, will know what a special place it is to play the world's greatest game. John, being the man he was, had no truck with the supposed elitism of polo and he welcomed and encouraged all comers with the greatest charm and warmth. I think of

him riding across the deer park to the ground with a stream of homebred ponies on a summer's Wednesday evening and I hear his loud greeting and see the glint in his eye for the fun ahead and it speaks to me of the very best of country and family polo.

It was nice to see above his obituary in the Scotsman a lovely picture from the 1990s of him on his all time favourite pony, George, and there is an even better one in the Service Sheet. George's great grandmother had been a tough old Shetland pony whose progeny were carefully bred up to playing height by John and Sheila over a number of years. George was a terrific polo pony and he retained some of the feisty spirit of his Island ancestors. Chukkas usually began with George thinking of flexing either his back or front-end upwards, only to be checked by John's unmistakable stentorian shout – a thunderous roar also sometimes issued to Sheila to stop gassing in the polo lines and get on to the pitch to start the Chukka!

It gave John and Sheila the greatest of pleasure that all the children played with them, and, while Mary and Stewart moved on from the game, Jamie has retained a lifelong involvement, running the Edinburgh Club for many years. Now his son, James is following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps and John's great-grandson, Freddie, the sixth generation, is now also showing signs of chasing the little white ball.

It may all have started informally but polo took John, Sheila and the family all over the world. The highlights of John's playing career were playing in Palm Beach with Ronald Ferguson and the Marquis of Waterford during the centenary celebrations of the USPA and also winning the 1994 Winemakers' Tournament in Argentina. The Winemakers was a roving tour by polo playing wine producers. John in fact invariably preferred beer over wine or champagne, but he was not averse to wider tastes if it helped his polo and his remarkable coup in lending the Douglas name to whisky, gin and vodka under the Lord's brand name gave him access to the Winemakers' international tournaments and John was in winning teams in France, Spain, Mexico and Chile.

He was a long time Steward of the HPA and he and his great friend and fellow polo player, Jim Haigh, founded the Finance Committee and helped bring the HPA into the modern world. Jim, like John, had given an old Club a new lease of democratic life, opening up Toulston in Yorkshire in 1980 to a new generation. John also served for many years on the Arena Polo Committee and also dealt with a number of tricky disciplinary issues at the HPA: he was fearless in facing up to Big Money at the top of polo in these battles. He was also the conscience of the HPA, when needed, helping it to take the right decisions during the difficult time of the Falklands War.

First and last though, John was a family man. He adored Sheila and they were a marvellous partnership. He looked after her wonderfully in the last few years even when he was ill himself. He loved being surrounded by family and was so proud of his children, grandchildren and four great-grandchildren, in all of whose activities he took the greatest of interest. He was wonderfully generous, giving all his 9 grandchildren a terrific start. He was an unforgettable Patriarch to all his family – Patriarch as James Callander says, of the Italian type, and James well remembers vital life lessons given to him as a young 8 year old when John taught him in a car yard the 'walk away'. Breaking off negotiations, John abruptly strode off but whispered in James' ear "Just you wait. He will come running down the stairs and offer me a deal". Sure enough a few moments later the Sales

Manager was pursuing them “Lord Morton, Lord Morton, I think we might be able to do something together after all”.

Young John Douglas, Stewart’s son, told his mother, after his Grandfather’s death, how glad he was that he came back home and worked alongside John on the farm for the last 5 years. He felt his Grandpa was a role model for how a man should be: he worked so hard, adored his wife, loved and supported his family, always interested in what was going on and full of entrepreneurial ideas even at the end to keep the farm moving forward.

John remained indefatigable to the end. He played polo far far longer than most and even when play was beyond him, he still hacked out around the Deer Park, stick in hand. His entrepreneurial drive remained undiminished in later years. He was only recently restrained by the family in seeing an unmistakable opportunity to buy a bankrupt golf course near Lanark from the Liquidator. Poignantly he was telling the auctioneers at Newcastleton at the end of last year he looked forward to being back the next year to look the bluegreys over once more. Even returning from hospital visits in the last weeks, he liked to divert to look at building sites, see what was going on, seeing if there was an angle.

John was the kindest and most delightful of men who lived the fullest of lives, and it was a gift to us all that he could remember that life in extraordinary detail and recount it with such gusto and hilarity to the last. That itself is a wonderful legacy of memories.

They threw the mould away after making John Douglas, he was unique, a man in a million, God rest him and God be good to him.