

November 2018

Barry Midgley

Way back when the world and we were a bit younger, a country music fellow Lucky Starr seemed to be constantly on Aussie radio singing that he 'had been everywhere, man....' The poor chap hadn't of course, however much loved senior Bridge Clubber Barry Midgley appears to have done it, in spades.

A stellar diplomatic career led the gregarious Barry and his wife Maureen to postings in Nigeria (Biafra), Iran, Finland, Cyprus, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and twice to Australia, where he finally ended up Consul-General.

In between postings in the mid 1980s the affable Yorkshireman had terrified diplomatic missions across the globe when he travelled around for two years checking that Foreign Office funds were being used exactly in the manner in which the Foreign Office had intended. Those forays encompassed Havana, Damascus, Hungary, Sofia, Dusseldorf, Munich, Hanover and Stuttgart, Tunisia, Zambia, Botswana and Lesotho, Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru, Mexico, Bolivia, Belize, Honduras and Costa Rica.

This extraordinary career started out fairly humbly when Barry was six and his police detective father died. As his mother had to go out to work, the diminutive Barrington was put in the care of the St Georges Police Orphanage in Harrogate. The timing was all up the spout, coinciding with WWII and the Blitz. York was only a secondary target, but Barry and his pals were certain Herr Hitler's secret agenda was the demolition of the region's famous choccy factories.

After Grammar School, Barry went to the Suez with the National Service Yorkshire Infantry. He recalls fleet-footed Dr Roger Bannister was testing soldiers' endurance abilities with different medications. The infantrymen took umbrage, and swapped pills with each other to sabotage the research.



Back in beautiful York Barry met a brilliant young milliner who had been born in the same nursing home as himself. Maureen fell under the Midgley spell as Barry volunteered for work in the Civil Service. During the early years he supplemented his white collar career with a weekend job at the Green Man pub in Ealing, a hostelry renowned for its highly excitable Irish clientele.

The Foreign Office then took over their lives. The couple's introduc-

tion to Australia was via the High Commission in Canberra. There was no lake in those days, but lots of cricket and soccer — where for some reason Barry played with the German side and was the diplomatic link between Germans and Austrians — all of whom simply refused to pass the ball to each other. On the home front, Maureen gallantly gave up millinery for motherhood and produced the first two of their children.

Then came a stint in Nigeria, which was somewhat of a shock after Australia. They arrived just after a massacre in the north and managed to spend seven months there before being evacuated during the Biafran crisis. Thanks to a tip-off from his driver, Barry was arrested because the constabulary did not like the Lagos plates on his diplomatic car. Released after a few hours, he was told the High Commission had been terribly worried .. whether the car would be safe. The place was shelled and bombed; Maureen and the children left first and by the time Barry got away, all their possessions had been looted.



The frugal Foreign Office showed its concern by offering a £600 loan, interest-free. With this (the F.O. told them on a Friday) they were to re-kit, buy another car and get themselves to a new posting in Tehran by the following Monday. En route they parked the car outside their hotel in Naples, where of course everything was looted once again.

The sea crossing to Beirut nearly wrote Maureen off but Tehran turned out to be beautiful. Barry was Consul. The traffic was awful; the climate extreme; but the jasmine, pomegranate bushes, birdlife and nightingales serenades were delightful. They did a lot of exploring and driving in the beautiful mountains. One time they were halted by horsemen, leading hundreds of horses owned by the then popular Shah to fresh pastures.



Inevitably, soccer entered the equation. Mountain shepherds would venture down from their fields to join in their game. Barry's casually garbed team played for the UK versus an immaculately uniformed West Germany at the Stadium prior to an Iran-Pakistan International match. Unfortunately the UK goalie wore glasses. At half-time organisers turned on the floodlights; he was bedazzled and blinded; they lost.

The couple returned to London for a few years during which time Barry made his mark in the House of Commons. An adjournment debate was to discuss deaths of pilgrims in



Mecca stampedes. Barry's colleague in charge of Middle East affairs fell ill, so his mantle fell on the young Midgley. He entered the House in great trepidation, following the Speaker, whose role it would be to write and pass to Barry any questions raised in the debate. All that trepidation was wasted : no questions were asked, perhaps due to the presence in the House of Commons of merely two Members.

With three youngsters to their credit, the couple set off in 1972 for a post in Finland and far too much winter. As a founding member of the Helsinki Cricket Club, (he has the tie to prove it) Barry ventured to Stockholm, where all of his team mates had put their occupations down as 'wicket-keeper'. The meticulous Swedes were unimpressed and woke them at 1.00 am to fill out their forms again. On the pitch things degenerated further : all of the Swedish side turned out to be West Indians, married to blonde Scandinavians.

Cyprus was next on the agenda, just following the Turkish invasion. Barry and Maureen loved the place and the big-hearted people, but the locals were confused and very sympathetic when after three years Barry was transferred ... to Turkey. Again, the Midgleys saw the glass as half-full, loving the countryside, the friendly local residents, visiting Gallipoli before it became overrun with tourists, touring Roman and Greek ruins, braving the bitter winters, poor air quality .. and medical facilities to match.

Back to London, Barry embarked on his three x three-monthly trips around the world each year checking that embassies were watching the petty and not so petty cash carefully. Then in 1987 they went to Riyadh, where he was First Secretary and Consul General, during the Gulf Crisis. Life was carefully regulated by local custom, with even television shows interrupted by the five daily calls to prayer. On a lighter note, a night club near the Embassy always had a bellydancer performing. When the dancer left the stage, fistfights would break out amongst the customers. Management would then ring a bell, madam and her veils would reappear, and everyone would calm down.



Barry's last diplomatic posting was for five years in the early 1990s as Consul-General in Canberra. By the time retirement loomed, Maureen had very sensibly fallen in love with Australia, but her husband yearned for the UK so they settled at Bournemouth, exchanging houses with people at Mossy Point in NSW for three months each year. They finally discovered Noosa and on their first propitious morning awoke in Gympie Terrace to the sound of birdsong. They rose and walked the riverfront, fell for the place and came to live here in 2008. Although the three children hold Australian passports, and after all his service for the Crown, Barry and Maureen are still waiting to be granted permanent residence in Australia.

Back to that a six-year old Barry and his orphanage : its founder was a Miss Catherine Gurney, who had been awarded the OBE in 1930. St Georges prided itself on keeping up with and celebrating the achievements of its children. In 1990 John Barrington Midgley was also awarded the OBE, by Her Majesty in person. Photographs were not allowed and Barry does not want any of us to know about it as he thinks it is pretentious. So we will not mention it here.

by Susie Osmaston