

# CLIFFORD TEBBIT

1925-2018



## **A tribute by the Revd Robert E. Dolman, MA**

Clifford once said to me that if you placed him on one of his fields in a dense fog he would be able to tell you his exact location by the feel and the texture of the soil. That speaks of the wisdom of the countryman garnered over long years of experience and of a deep and loving attachment to a particular place.

It was that wisdom, which rises from deeper springs than just cleverness, that Clifford drew on not only in the management of his farm and the fields he loved, but in maintaining his relationships with people and in the directing of his own life. Clifford was a wise man who knew by instinct, amongst other things, when to speak and when to be silent.

And the love of the land, and in particular the patch of land we call Toft was part of his DNA. It was here that he was educated, from here that he cycled to the Perse School where he became Head Boy, trying to hide his uniform from the jeering lads of Comberton as he passed through. It was here that he was married to Diana in 1963 and here that he raised his family. It was here for a number of years until middle age that he won the Around the Village race at the annual Sports Day. It was here that he

took a central part in community life and to this community that he leaves a rich legacy for which we have come to give thanks today.

From his very earliest days the love of animals and birds was a huge part of his life. Keeping pet budgerigars and leading shire horses as a boy were only the beginning. He devoted decades of his life, seemingly indestructible, to the care of his land and his stock. Virtually everything took second place to the farming calendar. It was not unknown for him to seek an escape from Christmas jollities to see to his animals.

He did not spare himself, and we could compile a catalogue of the falls and the kicks, the over exposure to the sun, the mishaps with machinery, and the visits to A and E. that punctuated his working life, though it has to be conceded that he had a somewhat cavalier approach to hazardous undertakings, to matters of health and safety and to risk assessments.

The budgerigars of his youth were matched in old age only a year or two ago by an attempt to keep guinea fowl. It was fitting that his very last outing, and one that he really wanted to make, should be to watch sheep being sheared. As Clifford's massively robust constitution eventually began to fail and he could no longer clamber on roofs and participate in physically demanding activities, his imagination and his day dreams still roamed over farming matters. Tending plants and vegetables with love, as he had always done, and pottering in the greenhouse, running the soil through his fingers, measuring the rainfall daily as he had done for many years, helped to sustain him almost to the end. Trees that he planted are part of his legacy, including the line of horse chestnuts leading down to this church.

Clifford was proud of the history of his family, who had been in Toft since the 1820s. He had a profound sense of home and of place. A few of his later years were spent in Hardwick, and although he had a lovely house and garden, his heart was not there. Those two miles made all the difference. In contrast to his brother Donald who, with the broad-brush stroke of a distinguished diplomatic career made the world his parish, Clifford fashioned a beautiful miniature and made this parish his world. It was vital that the native should return. I fancy he would have applauded the sentiment of a writer with local connections, John Bunyan, who said, 'Christians are like flowers in a garden that stand and grow where the gardener hath planted them.' For Clifford, as for the biblical Hebrew psalmist in exile in Babylon, it was hard to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. And having achieved his homecoming, Clifford enjoyed the proximity of his land and the open acres he could survey from his window in Mill Lane.

Clifford had sung the Lord's song from infancy and was thoroughly immersed in the life of the then very small Toft Primitive Methodist Chapel, which his forebear John Tebbit had helped to build in the 1860s. The religious and theological world of the 1920s and 30s was very different from that of today. Clifford told me how as a boy in the Sunday School he had been really scared by the vigorous hellfire sermons of some of the

visiting local preachers. His own faith matured and broadened as he thought and questioned.

The churches in Toft were stronger numerically then than they are now but they were divided by an unholy apartheid. Church and chapel housed two different cultures, were two different worlds. In Toft the waters had been further muddied in the first years of the last century by a bitter standoff between the Rector and the schoolmistress about the teaching of the Church of England catechism in the village school, and the memory of that will still have been fresh and raw in the Primitive Methodist community as Clifford grew up.

Clifford cherished his Methodist roots. He played a very full part in the life of the chapel, giving generously of his time to playing the organ, teaching in the Sunday School, caring for its fabric and devoted to its people. But he wanted to live on a bigger map and longed for a more united Christian witness and work in the village. He is one of the major architects of the Local Ecumenical Partnership that now embodies Anglicans and Methodists together in a common life of worship and service. One of the first steps towards reconciliation was the establishment in 1950 of the Toft Fireside, a weekly evening meeting for villagers from either church or none, beginning with a hymn and a prayer and then welcoming a visiting, often quite eminent, speaker. The range of subjects was encyclopaedic. Clifford recruited the speakers and acted as secretary for 36 years. It was a significant breakthrough when early on the Rector agreed to be Joint President of the Fireside alongside the Methodist Minister. It is worth noting that when he initiated this pioneering work, Clifford was only in his mid-twenties and not long out of military service in Burma. Vision budded in his youth, as wisdom blossomed in his maturity.

In the early 1980s a creative partnership between the Minister of the Chapel and the Rector was to move things forward, and another push at the turn of the century led to a properly constituted Local Ecumenical Partnership. Clifford was pleased to see and to play an active role in all this but he would say to me with some disappointment and some impatience, perhaps conscious that his time was becoming short, that he was anxious that progress towards a fuller unity should just speed up. I think we could say of Clifford, as was said of St Francis of Assisi, that his mind had no frontiers. He certainly exemplified one of John Wesley's marks of a Methodist, in being a friend of all and enemy of none.

Clifford's mental and spiritual horizons were much wider than the farm and the chapel. He had a daily appointment with the Times newspaper, and carefully watched unfolding political events and the personalities of the day with keen interest and sometimes mild amusement. He was recruited as a magistrate at an extraordinarily young age and served for forty years. Stories can be told of young offenders whose lives he helped to turn around. He also found time, at various stages of his life, to be a

governor of Kneesworth Approved School, to serve on Juvenile and Probation Committees and more locally to be a governor of the Meridian School and Chair of the governing body of Comberton Village College. He was conscious that he had a privileged education, though in fact he had to do a milk round in order to pay his school fees, and wanted others to get a good start in life.

You will each have your own memories of Clifford's humour and humanity. He was given to hospitality and opened up his home and his land for the benefit of others. He was ready to lend his equipment and tools, and to give practical help to beekeepers and other farming colleagues in times of crisis. Students from the Cambridge University Methodist Society came out to the farm for bonfire parties. Clifford was a great encourager and a loyal friend.

Sometimes men who take a leading part in so many activities are strong and dominant, even domineering, personalities. By contrast we remember Clifford as a man who was self-effacing, gentle, modest, even reticent. Yet in some circles the bare mention of the word Toft would instantly call forth the question, 'How's Cliff Tebbit?'

Faith was an inner reservoir upon which he drew; fellowship was a flame that burned brightly within; fun and laughter were daily companions. We leave to the last the family life Clifford cherished and the love and concern he lavished. He was wonderfully supported by Diana throughout more than half a century of shared enterprises and very varied experiences, in all his extraordinarily busy life of public service and in the routines of the farm. She created a beautiful environment to which he could come home, whether from the fields or from caravanning holidays in secluded Norfolk, and an elegant and well-stocked table from which he was nourished and strengthened. As increasing frailty darkened the last chapter of his life she nursed and cared for him with immense patience and gentle love.

Mike and Ann and their children honour, and delight in, the memory of an exemplary loving father and grandfather. His nephew and nieces too he treated as his own; he was a hugely positive and supportive influence in their lives while their parents served far away overseas.

We have remembered Clifford's wisdom and shrewdness. We have remembered the strong loyalties that drove him forward. We have remembered the faith in Christ that underlay everything else and the hope enshrined in this service that nothing, and certainly not death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. May he rest in peace and grow in love and rise in glory.