

## **Keith**

(Address given at his funeral on 26<sup>th</sup> November 2008)

Some words about Keith Robert McMillan Elder – I think he was proud of that, and why not?

I first knew Keith when I joined BICC Research labs in 1961 as a raw 17 year old. Keith, a young PhD, was my first boss.

He had come to London a year earlier, and never left – but he never lost his Aberdeen accent.

At that time I am not sure I really knew what a PhD was, let alone could understand his thesis on “Free radical polymerisation”. I still probably thought that a free radical was a political agitator rather than a chemical species that was vital to the expanding plastics industry.

He gradually told me about his background, and his father of whom he was immensely proud, having won a Military Cross at Arras in WW 1 and then served for the astonishing length of 44 years as Minister at Cults East church. During that time the church burnt down due to a fault with the heating system. Keith was only 7 at the time and it made a strong impression on him.

At the age of 18 he went to Aberdeen University, where he spent 7 years gaining his chemistry degree and then his doctorate. His keenness for participatory sports certainly developed and thrived during those years.

In the BICC laboratory Keith quickly impressed his young assistant as a man who was a meticulous experimenter and record keeper. He showed me how precision and accuracy gave sound results and how sloppy work did not. His care extended from the smallest measurement to the cleanest test tube; from the neatest graphs to the most perfectly constructed

apparatus, and the clearest handwriting to the tidiest desk. It wasn't just bench-sized work either. Towards the end of the laboratory's life he planned and fitted out a major new test room with the same care and thoroughness.

For a short time after BICC he worked for Cookson's, the ceramics and electronics company, and then for the Warrington Fire Research in Stratford E. He would probably like the idea that the Stratford site has been cleared to make way for a major sporting event.

I tried to list Keith's active participation in sport. I managed tennis, badminton, squash, table tennis, golf, hockey, football and even cricket. Add to that darts, snooker and bridge it makes a formidable list – and I've probably missed some. Tennis was his main sport, and very good he was, reaching Middlesex League level in his prime, and continuing to play club tennis to a high standard into his 60s. Hardly surprising that, even off a formidable handicap, he was often the BICC Wood Lane champion.

Why was he so good? Well he was undoubtedly a natural, but he kept fit, never seemed to put on an ounce of weight, and he was dedicated and determined – he hated losing, though when he did, he accepted it with good grace – and then made sure it didn't happen again!!

His other sporting talent was information. If you needed a name, or a date, or an event, Keith was the man to ask. He had a fantastic fund of facts – “When did Partick Thistle last win the Scottish Cup?”; “Who were runners-up in the Wimbledon Mixed Doubles in 1936?” - and no help from Google!.

Outside of sports and games, he had a passionate interest in jazz. As well as appreciating the music he applied the same thoroughness to gathering knowledge of the musicians and their lives.

When he first came to London he acquired a map. Not the Underground or the buses, but a map of pubs –Scottish pubs – William Younger's in fact. He delighted in visiting each and every one in search of draught Mc Ewan's export ale. I was one of the active supporters of this adventure, especially on a Friday night in the East End or somewhere along the riverside.

Don't run away with the idea that beer was the only social activity. There was his love of jazz, and then there was Wembley, Wimbledon, Lords, Twickenham, the old White City Stadium – all sporting venues that he and I visited together – plus film shows and other BICC social functions. Keith was generally part of the BICC “scene”, which was a lively one sponsored by a typically paternalistic company of its era.

Since the demise of the labs in 1987, Keith was a staunch member of the small committee that has kept the spirit of BICC alive via an annual reunion – an event that regularly attracts 60 or more even 20 years on. We will sorely miss his contribution to that event.

I could tell you a lot more – how he introduced “Springbank” malt whisky to BICC; how his Scottish accent was the subject of playful banter in the labs; how he and I went annually to South Wales to watch club rugby; how he..... well

I am sure that you all have your positive memories of Keith.

Here are some words written by former colleagues in the recent days:

**Brief ones**

*One of the nicest people I ever worked with*

*Keith - a great guy*

*A very nice bloke*

*I have lots of fond memories of Keith.*

*He will be greatly missed.*

*I will remember Keith's good humour both during Wood Lane days and at our reunions.*

*A very kind and considerate man*

### **Everyday ones**

*My wife and I saw Keith only a couple of weeks ago - we used to shop in M&S Ealing Broadway and used to bump into him regularly. All the staff at M&S knew and liked Keith.*

*I look back fondly on those early years, and us doing his Daily Telegraph crossword with him. (He didn't need much help usually)*

*Only about three weeks ago I met Keith at our local Waitrose supermarket in West Ealing. and we agreed that we should meet for a drink before Christmas.*

### **More expressive ones**

*A man not much older than us, who we worked with and joked with for so long.*

*To me Keith was one of the few people who was the very essence of BICC Wood Lane, and provided the continuity between long lost memories and the present day.*

*I shall never forget Keith's sense of humour and his presence. We all benefitted from having him as a friend and colleague.*

*I will always remember his smiling face.*

*I'll look back and remember the good times , I think that would be Keith's approach.*

Maybe remembering the good times and smiling is not too easy today.

On these occasions I have listened to Christina Rossetti's poem that ends:

**Better by far you should forget and smile  
Than that you should remember and be sad.**

I am sure that we can do better than that, and that we will be able to remember Keith and smile. If you cannot smile today, then try next Friday which would be his 74<sup>th</sup> birthday. Take a glass; pour in a "wee dram" of your best malt whisky; and raise it to Keith with a smile. And don't forget, whisky loses some of its volume as it matures in the cask. They call it "the angel's share". Assuming that he has negotiated the bureaucracy at the Pearly Gates, I've a feeling Keith will be down at "The Angels Arms" next week for his birthday dram!

Thank you for taking the time to be here today.

MH  
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