

Tribute paid to Robert Wills our Mr Uppingham

Story By: RON SIMPSON



If Uppingham were a kingdom surely there is one man who would have deserved recognition as royalty. Major employer, property owner, international businessman, leather goods manufacturer, sports club and youth champion, community benefactor, hotelier par excellence, brewer, restaurant patron, company director extraordinaire, honorary Rotarian and loyal friend Robert Hugo Weyl Wills, has died. Known to many as Mr Uppingham, his contribution to the history, development and international recognition of Uppingham has been remarkable. I offer a personal perspective on the man.

Robert was born in July 1949. Companies House records show 36 active directorships at the time of his death. A remarkable work ethic and a straight talking approach to business earned him respect from business leaders across a wide range of industries. Like his father before him, his core business for many years was the production of high quality leather goods using predominantly local labour sold through internationally recognised outlets. His younger years travelling around Europe acquiring the raw materials necessary to source the production lines, was a period of adventure he occasionally talked about. As was the time he heard about his fathers death and had to take over the family business.

Robert was the second largest employer in Uppingham. His decision to diversify into the hospitality business was a further stroke of good fortune for Uppingham. The acquisition of Don Paddy's and subsequent ownership of the HSBC bank building gained a foothold in the market

place. The wine bar culture with atmosphere to match continued to grow, nurturing a developing outdoor cafe society. Add music and occasional events and one can see why the venue has remained popular with young and old. Among my memories will be how Robert would often talk with pride of how he met and developed a working relationship with James Torbell, once Uppingham's youngest licensee and now a director and leading figure within the family business. He was all for young people!

It was a stroke of genius and hugely popular when Robert acquired the rather run down Falcon Hotel. It was desperately in need of investment and a quality refit. "What does Robert Wills know about hotels? The Falcon is not a viable investment" said one former leader of the county council. How wrong that critic was! A top to bottom quality physical restoration of the building has resulted in a vibrant community hub and a new heart for the town centre. In partnership with wife Carol, supported by James and the staff team, Robert went on to create an outstanding quality venue catering for everything from major weddings and business conferences to a tourism destination attracting five star online reviews for its bedrooms and quality of service.

Robert's subsequent acquisition of The Vaults pub completed a move to protect and preserve quality in Uppingham's primary physical asset. However, it is the character of the man, not just his business achievements, which earned him his

reputation as Rutland's most amiable person.

I first met Robert Wills when I was serving as Uppingham Town Mayor. I had written to 30 business folk in the town asking for an hour of their time to talk about how we might work together to move the town forward. Robert was the first to respond, and with typical generosity, invited me to talk over lunch. From that initial conversation, a nationwide recognised business and community governance relationship has evolved. He was the founding chairman of the Uppingham First Community Partnership, a staunch supporter of the Uppingham Business Forum and has provided a first class venue for the quarterly public meetings of the Uppingham Neighbourhood Forum from its inception. Others, more knowledgeable than I, will talk of his contribution to education, youth service and sport. I can confirm he was the driving force behind preserving a quality high street. Fibre to the premises broadband, free Wifi, Rutland's first electric car charging point, the Uppingham webcam, the Uppingham Golden Ticket, the Uppingham Hopper are just a few of the town centre projects he invested in and helped champion. Little wonder that Robert was the recipient of a Biz Club Annual Award for his work.

Uppingham and Rutland have lost a great community champion. The community's condolences go to Carol Wills and her children; they have every reason to be proud of their family contribution to the town's heritage.

May Robert rest in peace.