

To Keel
with best wishes Edward
What is your latest news?

JOHN ASPINALL
AMONG
HIS FRIENDS



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For me he was and will always be a hero figure, a bigger man by far than his contemporaries. He did not really belong in this century, but in an epoch of chivalry and grandeur when the loyalties and allegiance which bound friends to each other were stronger and more enduring than they can ever be in this more superficial age.

CARLA POWELL

I have few regrets in life – but I do have one very large one. During the last election (1997) I met two quite extraordinary men: they were larger than life, they both had vision, wit and intelligence, and John Aspinall and Jimmy Goldsmith were remarkable individuals. Meeting them was a privilege – losing them was, and is, a huge sadness. Losing old friends gives sorrow, but with it comes memories of good times and laughter. When new friends go, the sorrow is there but so too is frustration and a feeling of emptiness.

The reason our circles crossed was entirely due to the Referendum Party. They were exciting times and I feel proud to have been part of the famous ‘rabbits’ army’. The one and only Referendum Party Conference at Brighton stands out in my mind. I was to make one of the speeches after a certain John Aspinall – ‘Aspers’. What would I make of this man whose notoriety went before him?

But why should a man like Aspers have been notorious? That is simple. My mother was a puritanical Baptist – a very good lady in every sense – and among her list of deadly sins was gambling. That potentially made Aspers a very bad man. To make matters worse, the media portrayed him as a gambling, animal-loving madman – the colourless clones of ‘tele’ land and ‘Sun’ land always have problems coming to terms with real people – individuals who follow their own paths and buck the system. The ‘system’ seems to have been designed for, and by, the grey and colourless: what a relief Aspers was neither.

I took to him immediately and we had a shared interest in animals, Africa and the well-being of our country. We met several times after Brighton. The memory of the 90th birthday party of Sir Laurens van der Post will always stay with me: it is of Aspers, Laurens, Christopher Booker and myself huddled in a corner talking of Europe, Africa, wildflowers and skylarks. It was the first time the four of us had been at the same place at the same time – two days later Laurens died.

ROBIN PAGE

Stimulating conversation is a vanishing art. Modern education, television, computer composition, video games and the internet are all responsible for the decline of the spoken and written word. Many people can barely construct a sentence today, either orally or on paper; and when they do, they rarely have anything significant to say.

The exception, par excellence, was John Aspinall. In his book *The Best of Friends*, he narrated unusual incidents and flamboyant ideas in a classic raconteur’s style. His heartfelt words on the loss of his best friends, Djoun and Jimmy Goldsmith, are among the most poignant I have heard.

My wife, Chryssée, and I always looked forward to visiting John, either in his office on Sloane Street, in one of his gambling clubs, or at Port Lympne and Howletts. We knew that John would regale us with historical as well as up-to-date information and extremely personal views on an incredible variety of subjects, including wildlife conservation, the Zulus, politics and women. One of our first meals with John was at Howletts. Approaching the dining room, we saw a life-sized stuffed gorilla toy perched in the chair opposite the head of the table where John would sit. Short-sighted Chryssée at first thought it was real, and why not? We had just heard John categorically deny the superiority of man over beast.

One of the longest sessions we had with John was in November 1996, when we were invited to his office for lunch, stayed for tea when Ian Player arrived, and were still discussing myriad topics when it was time for drinks. Intellectually exhausted, but invigorated by John’s idealistic enthusiasm, we barely noticed the soaking rain when we trudged back to our hotel.

Whenever John took us around his two zoos, and I would ask a question or two about a rare animal we were observing, his answers were encyclopaedically detailed. Not only would he tell me all the natural habitats of the particular species, when it had been discovered, when individuals had first been kept in captivity, he also knew how many were presently in which zoos. Then he would give me the history of his own animals, from where he got them, or when they were born in his zoos, their personal names, those of their offspring; and then he would explain their diets, breeding successes and future prospects.

Of course, John did not just talk about his animals. His life was intertwined with them. It would be difficult

to forget John stroking his tigers, wrestling with his gorillas, sitting on the bonnet of his car in the middle of a paddock, with loaves of bread, hand-feeding his American bison herd. I have never witnessed such closeness and understanding between man and animal. Chryssee and I admired the encouragement he gave his keepers to learn everything they could about their charges and to interact with them. We were among the first to applaud the outcome of John's two-year battle with Canterbury Council on handling animals.

John was also an excellent guide to the works of art in his gambling clubs. Chryssee and I know nothing about gambling, but we do appreciate paintings, drawings, sculpture and furniture. John's collection, most animal-orientated, greatly appealed to us. Some of my favourite of his paintings were French, illustrating animals in Indo-China during the Thirties. I recall the bemused faces of the members when we spent too much time standing in front of one wonderful objet d'art after another, talking about the artist or his

subject, instead of gambling.

Dinners at the club were always stimulating, with John initiating conversation with his fascinating friends. The choice of excellently prepared food was wide-ranging, due to the many nationalities of the members. One could have Lebanese, Indian, Chinese or European cuisine, but veal was never on the menu, for obvious reasons. The dinners would often last until the early hours of the morning, and the last words were just as invigorating as the first. John was able to discuss so many issues in a lively way because whatever he did, he did it to the fullest extent and he had the brilliance of knowing how to share his experiences and what he read with others. He was a superb eclectic.

We will remember John with great affection and we will miss him very much. As Chryssee and I bid our farewells to John who has gone to Valhalla, we know he will conquer the giants and we suspect that Odin will meet his match with him.

CHRYSSEE AND ESMOND BRADLEY MARTIN

