

Peter Placito remembered

Warmth, generosity, humility, compassion and decency were prominent words in a flurry of touching emails between a reminiscing group of old members back in April, prompted by the sad passing of Peter Placito, our esteemed Cricket Club President. “The greatest tribute to Peter's love of cricket - and of Wadham cricket in particular - is that we are having this email exchange, over 20 years after many of us left the college. He touched all our lives,” was the most succinct expression of our shared feelings.

This enduring affection and camaraderie began in 1983 when Ernie Hacker suggested that, as cricket captain, I should invite Peter to become President of the Cricket Club in recognition of his continuing contributions towards the fabric of the (then new) sports ground. Little did we suspect what might follow? Certainly, Ernie had designs on funds for more equipment and facilities for the club – nets, an artificial wicket, covers... to name a few of his subsequent contributions; but the idea that 25 years hence many of us would still be returning to represent Peter in an annual President's XI fixture against the College 1st XI was far from our minds.

Peter's generosity extended to subsidising the President's XI tours, whence the spirit of the Prez Boys was distilled and matured between 1985 and 1990 in Cardiff, Paris, Norwich, Dublin, The Hague and Northumberland. Those touring teams were made of current and returning players, producing cricket of high quality, not to mention the off-field antics. Our finest hour was surely the thumping victory over Simon Hewitt and his expat team-mates in Paris. Peter took great pleasure in making a playing contribution, in spite of being troubled by his back. To his absolute delight, a Norfolk farmer found an answer to this ailment, a rub down with horse liniment; typically, Peter insisted on the farmer taking £20 for the pungent gallon drum, which had a much lesser value. His beloved wife, Margherita, added much to this rich tapestry and especially loved to encourage us into song; we were saddened at her passing in 2000 and planted a tree at the sports ground in her memory. She shared his compassion for those in our number; they were quick to send ointments and potions from Portugal to cure our ills or would quietly deal with minor disciplinary issues, College fines and excessive bar bills. Their generosity knew no bounds.

What turned out to be his 25th and last season, 2008, saw a triangular 20-20 tournament played at the ground, followed by dinner in hall. It was noted how we had blazed a trail well ahead of modern cricket fashion: 20-20 was not new to us and we had been bank rolled by our very own petroleum magnate for those 25 years! Fittingly, he was in tremendous form; a team-mate remarked: “another fond moment was chatting with him at breakfast in hall completely and utterly hung-over and dead from the waist up: the result in the end was a home win to PJ by 2,564 words to 3. 'Triffic! 'triffic!”

Sadly, Peter will not be able to see the portrait of Wadham's finest sportsman, CB Fry, take its place in hall; his fascination with Fry and determination to commemorate him appropriately had become a significant mission for him and the portrait a major objective. He was the catalyst behind a splendid dinner to mark the 50th anniversary of CB's death, attended by grandsons Charles (ex-President of MCC and a playing Prez Boy to boot) and Jonathon Fry and numerous members of their families. Many sporting students have benefited financially from the CB Fry fund Peter was instrumental in setting up, which has improved the College's sporting prowess.

Unbeknown to the team, one of his last presidential acts was to identify and prime his successor; we sincerely hope that in doing this, he had not anticipated the great umpire's final finger and the visit from Father Time. His fellow Foundation Fellow, Stephen Stow, has accepted the post with gusto. The President's cap was passed on to Stephen at the memorial dinner after his first President's match in charge last June – appropriately won by his team and punctuated by a minute of applause for his predecessor. Stephen agreed to take the post on condition that we do our utmost to perpetuate Peter's legacy of camaraderie and compassion through the enjoyment of cricket. The first steps have been put in place with matches planned for next June and a commitment from the current generation to follow our lead and supplement our numbers as ageing limbs and failing eyesight take their toll on our numbers.

Peter bound us together, with bonds that cannot be broken.

Rob Young (1981)