

So Who Are You, Harold Beck?

This was the question I was asked at a Supper Club in May 2015. I had 15 minutes to reply. The following was substantially my response.

I said the short answer is "I wish I knew!" The most important part of the long answer is that I am a doting husband, a doting father and a doting grandfather.

As for the rest, I was born in Kensington, London. I had three brothers and a sister and we were blessed with very caring parents.



Much of who I am comes in a roundabout way from my father's love of music – he made a living by running a printing works with his two brothers but he was also a pianist, organist and choirmaster. There was much music at home and we went to concerts at nearby Albert Hall as well as at Queen's Hall, which was close to my Polytechnic school in Regent Street. I went to my first Prom 77 years ago, age 13.

In 1939 came the war, I was evacuated to Minehead and all of a sudden found myself deprived of music. So I bought a 1-valve battery radio with earphones at a jumble sale and was again able to feast myself on whatever concerts and recitals I could pick up. The economic reality of technology soon caught up with me – I couldn't afford the batteries out of my pocket money so I made do with a crystal set. This introduction to electronics led me to switch from arts to science subjects halfway through school and I went on to study Physics at Kings College London, which I joined while it was evacuated to Bristol. I returned with it to London in time for the little Blitzes, V1s & V2s. In 1944 I was called up but my physique was so poor that I was declared unfit for military service.

My first job after graduating was in Research and Development at British Oxygen Company, mainly setting up a laboratory to determine the electrical properties of plastics. Another project was to measure the movement of ground in Wembley caused by a huge piston machine producing liquid oxygen – the residents surrounding the factory wanted something done about the vibration causing cracks in their buildings, which they had tolerated during the war.

Also, as the only electronics man in a Department full of chemical and mechanical engineers, I was asked to give a talk on how television works. Television transmission had not long been resumed after the wartime break and Londoners were buying their first-ever TV set. I built a TV set and also a slow motion version to show how the picture was built up. The BBC gave me a tour of Alexandra Palace, the only TV studio and transmitter in the country.

It was while I was at BOC that I met and married Sheila and we set up home in three rooms we rented in the Vicarage of the Latimer Road church in which our wedding had taken place.

In 1950 I joined the Research Department of Cambridge Scientific Instrument Company, working on medical electronics and on measuring equipment for submarine-chasing frigates and HTP submarines. The application of electronics to medicine was at a very early stage and I worked in close cooperation with researchers in teaching hospitals, such as Hammersmith Hospital and the National Heart Hospital. In 1956 I wrote a review of *Electronics and the Human Heart* in which I hopelessly underestimated the growth of electronics in medicine – it never occurred to me that there might be a box of electronics by almost every hospital bed.

We attended Holy Trinity Church in the centre of Cambridge and our three daughters were baptised there. I was on the Parochial Church Council and the Cambridge Christian Council. When our Vicar was appointed Bishop to the Forces he explained the Liberal Evangelical tradition of Holy Trinity Church as a guide to choosing his successor. According to a biography it was at Holy Trinity some two decades later that, after discussion with an evangelistic preacher who had delivered a sermon at a Service earlier in the evening, the current Archbishop of Canterbury took the final step of committing himself to Christ.

At this time I was introduced to two other long-term activities - I became a Freemason and I joined a local Committee of the Institution Electrical Engineers.

After six years in Cambridge I changed from Town to Gown – I was appointed Head of Electronics of the Cavendish Laboratory, a powerhouse of Physics, made Head of a Practical Class to update its teaching to what was taking place in the world outside and elected a senior member of Gonville & Caius College. In addition I was, because of my physics and Cavendish associations, appointed Regional Scientific Training Officer in Civil Defence and in this capacity I took part in 48-hour exercises in sealed bunkers and talked to senior Police officers about the effects of an H-bomb.

After five years I was poached from the Cavendish by English Electric to a job at Marconi Instruments, St. Albans. My function was to set up a department to innovate new instruments and in due course I became Research Manager. My biggest project was to lead a consortium of four companies aimed at supplying the Army with automatic test equipment.

In the IEE I established committees on Electronic Instruments and Electronics Design. Much to my surprise I was also invited to chair an editorial board of the Institute of Physics.

At M.I. I became concerned about attempts to teach me 'power game' methods of management, which were deemed necessary for my career in the Group, and after four years I felt I had to resign. For the next five years I carried out consulting and teaching assignments. It was a very turbulent period and very tough, especially on Sheila.

One highlight of that time was forming a group to look at dangers of applying psychological techniques to training – that had been one of the problems at M.I. The group was Church-based and included the Bishops of Hertford and Bedford, the Connexional Editor of the Methodist Church, clergy and laity.

Another highlight was chairing a Conference on Electronics Design in Cambridge and yet another memorable and perplexing event was being invited to be a visiting Professor in Moscow (which I declined).

My next and last move was to Hatfield Polytechnic Management Centre teaching general management and behavioural studies. This provided the bread and butter while I got involved in a number of activities in the community.

My first voluntary activity outside my teaching job was to organise a 2-week Stewardship Conference in the Parish of Harpenden. I say outside my job but in fact it embodied a management approach to Stewardship – the use of all our resources – such as talents, time and the Holy Spirit as well as money - to achieve our Christian objectives both as individuals and as a Church. Many in the Parish worked extremely hard for eighteen months to make the Conference a success.

After the Conference I had time on my hands and Stewardship-fashion I wondered what to do with it for the good of others. At that point I was asked if I would like to stand as a Conservative candidate for election to the new St. Albans District Council, about to be formed. After much thought and prayer I agreed and in June 1973 I was elected.

Later that year I heard from a Cambridge Masonic friend that Rev. Marcus Braybrooke was preaching at a United Nations Service at St. Nicholas Church, Harpenden. His sermon led to my joining the UN Association – I felt I needed an antidote to my local activities.

I was then put forward by the District for membership of a local Community Health Council, which the Government was setting up in England and Wales. The CHC elected me its first Chairman and that activity, which included finding premises, recruiting a Secretary, visiting hospitals, and meeting health authority managers, took up far more of my time than the District Council itself. After three years I became a member of Hertfordshire Area Health Authority so I was concerned with the National Health Service over the whole of Hertfordshire and was in addition involved in the appointment of medical staff, disciplinary appeals and Section hearings.

Courses for practicing managers needed projects and my local government and health authority activities gave me plenty of opportunity to spot and arrange them. Moreover through those activities I saw the latest Government Circulars, which were of considerable value in the courses, especially for public services students.

1975 was a key year in my life because:-

1. Sheila and I celebrated our Silver Wedding Anniversary – to mark the occasion, I planted a magnolia tree which 40 years later is giving us much pleasure.
2. I became Chairman of the Harpenden Branch of the UN Association. I learned much about the world first-hand from speakers working abroad for the UN and NGOs as well as diplomats from the embassies of Egypt, USSR, USA and China. We were the second most active branch in the UK, Westminster understandably being the first.
3. A play entitled *Speak Up, Harold Beck!* was put on in Coventry. The play itself, the programme and the posters at the theatre gave me much food for thought for I had much about which to speak up.
4. There was a falling out with Conservatives because I persisted in fulfilling a promise made in my election manifesto. This led to my election as an Independent in 1976 and again in 1979 when I topped the poll. In exceptionally political 1983, however, I lost my seat forever.

In 1982 I started on another major activity namely co-chairing with Charles Hill, the wartime Radio Doctor, an enquiry into the care of the elderly in and around Harpenden. Its report *Living Longer in Harpenden* was published in April 1983.

I retired in 1989, aged 65 years, but in my quarter-century as a pensioner I have been quite active. For example, for a while I chaired the Harpenden Branch of what is now called Asthma UK as a way of expressing thanks for the medical advances which have enabled me to live with asthma for 87 of my 90 years.

Because of hearing problems, I have had to give up Committee work but here technology has come to the rescue – I have developed computer and basic website skills so I have been able to communicate that way. My digital output includes evidence to a Select Committee which is in the House of Commons Library and a Motion on military resources submitted to the UNA-UK AGM, which was accepted without debate by the Executive and specifically commended to the UN Secretary General by a UN officer in London.

Harold Beck
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