

Nicholas Baker Memorial Service Address 23rd June 2008
Matthew Dryden

Welcome to this service for Nick. What a crowd, what a gathering from all corners of the world to mourn Nick's passing, but mainly, as Nick would hate us to be miserable, to celebrate and praise his life and achievements. Shortening his name to Nick crept in at Oxford. He is more familiar to his parents and many local friends as Nicholas. I shall probably carry on with Nick. Nick is disappointed not to be here in person and he sent his apologies. I am sure he is here in spirit as there was nothing he liked more than a gathering of his friends and this is quite a gathering. Indeed when the Baker family were organising the social event of the year last summer– Arabian nights -, Nick said that he would much prefer to spend money on a party than a wake, so unless Mrs Baker has been especially generous, don't expect too much after the service. Your presence is a testament to everything Nick meant to us all: a warm friend, a husband to Karen, father to Rosanna, Francesca and Charlie, son to Jane and Christopher and brother to Lucinda and Nigel.

We are here to mourn but particularly to celebrate the life of a great man. We mourn a life tragically cut short by an illness out of the blue with no known precipitating factors and which seemed so unfair. Nick with characteristic stoicism said 'Stuff happens' and on being told his diagnosis said 'Well I suppose someone has got to have cancer'. That is not to say he accepted his illness. Nick fought it very successfully for a long time with great courage and he never let it obviously get him down. In fact it inspired him to do some remarkable things. As Nick was usually late for most things, it seems particularly ironic that he has departed early for the celestial feast halls.

His fiftieth birthday is tomorrow. Almost half a century ago, the baby Nicholas, bundled up, was brought to his mother by a nurse in Queen Charlotte's Hospital. Seeing Mrs Baker's look of dismay the nurse said 'Never mind, he'll look better in the morning'. Nick did not look back from that moment and seemed to have charmed everyone he met since. He was brought up in Broad Oak by his parents Jane and Christopher and with his siblings, Lucinda and Nigel. Hearing their stories it sounds as though he had the wilfulness then to be mischievous and the charm to get away with it. I know a younger Baker with similar characteristics. By the late 70's, he was about the most eligible man in Hampshire. Dashing, good looking, entertaining – shame about the car- a clapped out Datsun – but he was the man all the mothers wanted to drive their daughters home, a safe pair of hands. Nick himself wasn't too keen on that label. He had a hidden hankering to be outrageously wild, but somehow the goodness of his character always shone through.

Nick was great. Great men in history books usually have a lot of personality flaws. Nick was great because he had none. Now, I know that no man is a hero to his valet. I am not suggesting for a moment, Karen, that you were Nick's valet, and I am sure he was a hero to you, but Nick really had almost no faults even to those who were close to him. I never saw him lose his temper or be deeply unpleasant about anyone. He has been said to slam a telephone down after difficult calls with clients. He kicked cars when they broke down and threw things at Gordon the horse when he couldn't catch him. The extent of his expletives when things weren't going to plan usually consisted of 'Good Grief!'

He was an endlessly engaging person to be with: warm, entertaining, generous. Ladies, you know how sitting next to many men at dinner parties can be a pretty dull experience – they talk about themselves, don't ask about you and are generally pretty self-centred. Well, Nick was none of those. He was somebody we all wanted to sit next to. A few years ago I was having supper in a restaurant by the sea in Porto Fino. Being a sad person I was alone and reading a book. A

conversation started up between me and a man sitting by himself at the next door table. He was an Argentinian yacht broker who had just been at the Genoa boat show. I asked him if he knew Nick Baker. 'Yes Nick Baker, what a great guy. If he was here we would not be sitting alone, we would be having a party!' Nick had a way of drawing all sorts of people into his circle and making them welcome.

Nick was a hugely positive person; always full of energy and activity. In his London days when asked what he was doing that evening he would say 'I'm out on the razz'. He loved to be around people and people loved to be around him. He hated missing out on a party. A telly supper was to him, a sign of failure. But don't let me give the impression he was a vacuous social butterfly. Far from it, he enjoyed events because of the people. He was a great engager of people. He took interest in what they did. He had a sparkling wit and the intelligence to make best use of it. He enjoyed the company of a wealth of humanity whatever their background and drew what was best out of them. This was a striking quality in someone who was often personally private and modest and appeared to have a very conventional British outlook.

Our Golden days at Oxford passed in a warm haze of adolescent chaos and general indiscretion. We were probably often boorish but it was boorishness in a splendid environment of intellectual delights and curiosities; a very stimulating place. Many of Nick's friends from those student days are here today. Nick lived with Stephen Ellis in a fine farmhouse in Pumney and then Winchester Rd. They were most hospitable. After one of many parties at which a lot of spaghetti was decorating the walls and ceiling, Nick was asked, in relation to the mess, if his woman was thorough. Nick replied 'I would have nothing to do with a woman who was not thorough!' It was remarkable for someone as fastidious as Nick that until he married Karen he could live with people who were so untidy – to mention no names, of course - both in Oxford and in London. He liked everything just so, but could put up with chaos in others. After one of the many burglaries in Ingelow Rd in London, Nick thought it best not to try and explain to the police that his housemate's room had in fact not been ransacked but was always like that.

At Oxford, Nick was unconstrained by the rigours of academia. Most of his friends thought he was reading geography. They probably still do. In fact he read Russian and French but as little as possible. His association with the Geography Schools was probably because he was frequently seen waiting outside for a young lady to emerge after lectures. His friends occasionally teased him for never opening Anna Karenina but while some of us should probably not have been at Oxford, Nick certainly made the grade intellectually, although he refused to follow educational dogma. Nick was very sharp, wise, witty, brilliant with language and very quick in repartee. On being asked by a journalist after Robert Maxwell's disappearance what he thought had happened, he quickly answered 'There must have been a big splash.'

He loved a sense of occasion and ritual and he celebrated the Englishness of those things: school, his college, the Air squadron, Eights week, Henley, Ascot, Cheltenham, harvest festivals, cricket, Pimms, this ancient cathedral. But he was never pompous and could and did talk to anyone. Nick did have a serious side. He was a very private person; never given to outbursts of emotion; somewhat secretive. Some people thought he must have been a spy. Perhaps he was! But what comes through time and time again talking to many of you was his sense of friendship, his integrity, his loyalty, and his ever present sense of humour. There was never a dull moment with Nick.

The early days in London were pretty much an extension of life in Oxford, not much work and lots of parties. Nick was keen to get on to the property ladder early on and decided on a house in

Ingelow Road. It was a pretty sordid place and Nick was attracted to it not by any architectural merit but by the size of the bath. This was another thing Nick liked – baths and the bigger the better! It was here that he met Karen, not in the bath, but in Ingelow Road. The postman delivered a letter in error to Nick's house at No. 53. Nick delivered the letter to the correct address at no 44 and Karen answered the door and the rest was history. So younger Bakers, you really do have the postman to thank for your existence. He was jolly lucky to find a beautiful wife who was so compatible, supportive and shared his sense of order.

He decided not long after his diagnosis that he was going to do something positive about it. He founded the Aqualung Trust to support medical charities especially those associated with cancer but others as well. To launch the appeal he decided that something noteworthy needed to be done. He received a lot of help in this from many sources, but it appeared to those of us watching from the sidelines that Nick planned and executed this achievement with his usual quiet understated efficiency. Not previously having been much of a sailor, he hatched a plan to sail the Atlantic, not as you or I might do it on the deck of a P&O liner, but in a 48' sailing boat, the Aqualung, single handed and while coping with his illness. For someone who thrived on the company of others to sail alone must have been an especial challenge. It was a Herculean and courageous feat and it was one which, with the aid of satellite communication, many of us were able to enjoy with Nick as we read the usually hilarious web diary from the comfort of our armchairs. I must read you a brief excerpt because it communicates the essence of Nick.

Aqualung raised a lot of money. It also spent it wisely as well and the success of this must largely be credited to Nick's wise stewardship. The Trust has provided great support to the Magpie cancer appeal in Winchester, the human genome project at the Institute of cancer research, Encompass which brought together Israeli and Palestinian teenagers, and aided Merlin by setting up a clinic in Dafur of which Nick was particularly proud. It is essential that the AquaLung Trust continues to help support the causes about which Nick and the family feel so strongly.

Diary excerpt

Thursday 3rd February 2005

*19 degrees North
29 degrees West*

A Mr. E from Gloucestershire wants his money back (note to Mission Control: has he actually sent any yet?). He says I am clearly not doing this trip singlehanded, as my earlier diary entry records having a Yankee wrapped round the forestay. Not a nautical sort of chap obviously. Anyway, he knows nothing about the two beautiful Danish stowaways I found in the master cabin. No, just kidding. But it is true that when I returned to the UK for 24 hours last week, leaving brother-in-law Johnny in charge in Las Palmas, he was visited by assorted beauties seeking a free ride to Antigua. The sonorous sounding Natalie from Italy was first, followed by two Danish girls describing themselves as "easy-going". Whatever can they mean?

Other loose ends: the Baked Beans. Yesterday's diary entry has produced many suggestions today about what one can do with a surplus supply of Heinz Baked Beans. First prize must go to an anonymous lady from Surrey (do I know you?) for a truly unusual idea. However, I do not have a bathtub on the boat, so it will have to wait.

Read the rest of the diary on www.aqualungtrust.org

(Matthew hands over to Toby Walker)

Matthew touched on Nick's sailing challenge and I would echo all that he has said. What most of you will be unaware of is that during Nick's adventure, during the storms and the solitude and the downright scary moments of which there were plenty, Nick also worked tirelessly on the sale of a very substantial yacht. Not only did he conduct this via satellite phone with his usual decorum and dedication to his client, but also took time to reflect on every word in every email correspondence and exchange, and was very quick to point out any grammatical error that his shore based support team foolishly made.

Certain of his colleagues joined him on the arrival of Aqualung into Antigua, and I know were dumbfounded by the condition of the yacht after the weather Nick had encountered. This is in no way discredit to Nick's quickly acquired sailing skills, purely recognition of just how difficult a passage it had been. The fact that Nick subsequently went on to broker the sale of Aqualung with the same dedication that he showed to all of the yachts he represented, just shows his tenacity and so often understated abilities.

The thing that struck me most about dealing with Nick, even in the harshest of circumstances such as Mid-Atlantic when he had only baked beans on the dinner menu, was that he was always able to keep a calm head and assess any difficulty with an objective, calculated and hugely experienced mind, and always found a solution to the problem at hand. Nick, as Camper and Nicholsons most experienced broker, said that there was always something new to learn from every transaction he oversaw. More importantly working with Nick always taught his colleagues something new each and every time we had the pleasure to deal with him. It is one of the many reasons he is regarded in such high esteem by not only everyone at Camper and Nicholsons, but in the whole of the yachting industry.

Nick maintained an open door policy in the office and was the most wonderful man to speak to and to exchange ideas and thoughts with. One of his greatest assets was to consider a proposal you would make to him or run by him, change it in a way that made you feel the essence of the idea was still yours, when in fact it left Nick happy the proposal was as he would have worded in the first place.

Everyone who has worked with Nick will testify to the reassurance and encouragement he always offered. Be it a major life-changing decision to a minor complaint or query, Nick always had sound and measured advice to offer. He was the life and soul of every office event, he was someone who held a team together and made you feel welcome, respected and important.

When commenting on his professional life as a yacht broker Nick would be the first to recognise the sometimes difficult times and struggles the career presents. During these times he never lost the core characteristics that Matthew and I have touched on, and his diligence and fortitude came good. Recently Nick has been influential in some of the most revolutionary yachts that the market will see for many years to come. In so doing he has earned the respect of the leading shipyards, designers, architects indeed anyone who can lay claim to being involved in the super yacht industry.

I asked a few of his closet colleagues to try and sum up in a word what Nick represented to them, a task that most recognised is impossible in one word, but I think the responses speak for themselves:

Courageous, charming, noble, inspirational, remarkable, debonair, indefatigable, pernickety, loved, and irreplaceable, are just some.

These are of course all so true. But having the pleasure of working alongside Nick for many years in London the thing that I think stands out most is his sense of humour and fun. Even in the latter stages of his illness he maintained this, portrayed no better than in a response to a recent email that jokingly suggested he might be taking things a little slower than usual. He replied as follows:

“Supremely lazy indeed and really quite civilised it is too. Breakfast in bed. Rise at midday. Small glass of sherry. Lunch. A little work. Tour of the estate. Tea. More sherry. Dinner. Bed. Late night film.

The stuff of life itself”.

Nick’s professional life was quite simply a joy to be part of and he remains an inspiration to all of the company and all of the industry. We continue to learn from all he initiated, and I think if nothing else that would make him proud.

Certain commentators have suggested that the Aqualung Trust, or his solo transatlantic, or his dedication to his clients and colleagues were Nick’s greatest legacy. They were not. His greatest legacy was the man he was himself, and his family and friends. I will allow Matthew to touch on this part of his life further. Before so I would just add that Nick, fully aware that this day would come, asked me to pass on his sincere thanks to all industry members for coming to celebrate his life and achievements. I know he would be concerned that the grammatical mistakes in what I have said are extensive, that you have all taken a day out of the office to be here when you should be selling his yachts, and that any more praise would, in his truly modest way be, and I quote, ”over-egging the pudding”. Nevertheless let us all be grateful that we had the chance to know and work alongside Nick Baker.

(Toby hands back to Matthew)

Slowing Nick down was only possible at the very end of his illness, and although heartbreaking for Karen and the children this was a short period of great and intense family warmth spent together in Nick’s room talking, reading poetry and being together. It gave Nick time to reflect and be at peace with the world.

Nick was immensely proud of his family and rightly so. He and Karen are blessed with three beautiful children who are all very talented in their different ways, having been lucky to inherit good looks, intelligence and sharp wit from their parents. I still have a bone to pick with Charlie Baker when on our way home from skiing in March he announced to a security person at Geneva airport that he had been kidnapped and wanted to be returned to his family on the ski slopes.

Can I just say to Karen, and especially to Rosanna, Francesca and Charlie, now is a time to be sad. It is right to cry and to grieve, but there will be light at the end of that sadness and what will be there will be a clear memory which will last with you always of Nicholas as a great man; a brave, kind, witty man. Be proud and happy that he was your husband and your father. He is one of God's noblemen. We will all miss him hugely.

He has achieved success, who has lived well, laughed often and loved much; who has earned the respect of intelligent men, and the love of little children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has left the world better than he found it. Anon.