

Snapshot of the Life of Geoffrey Ronald O'Connell

By John Bourke

Geoffrey Ronald O'Connell (often referred to by the nickname GROC) was born on the third of June 1940 in Wembley London. His mother was Welsh and his father was Irish, and this combination developed the unforgettable character that we all knew in our Jaguar Club as Groc or Grumpy. Early in his life, the family moved to Gerard's Cross in Buckinghamshire where his father was a very successful toolmaker



The next stage of his life started at kindergarten, where as a result of his less than acceptable antics, the mothers of all his classmates stated that they would remove their little darlings from kindergarten, if that O'Connell boy did not behave as a young child should.

Geoffrey was expelled. As his schooling days progressed, so did his ability to be expelled which over time resulted in a total of five expelling's. Finally, in exasperation, his mother, Matty, sent him off to Saint Paul's which he attended as a day boy and he lived with his Auntie Dorothy, who in actual fact was a famous war hero from the Second World War.

At Saint Paul's he featured as an excellent sportsman at both Cricket and Rugby. No doubt that these attributes overcame his propensity to misbehave, although he was quite a competent scholar as well.

On leaving school Geoffrey joined his father in the toolmaking business. This gave him the



interest in mechanical engineering which he held all his life. From toolmaking he moved on to buying a site of one acre on the Grand Union Canal where he set up a marina with boat removal facilities, cranes and associated equipment, essential for this business.

As an aside, he bought and sold, for a profit, a classic 1953 Fiat 1100 /103.

The proceeds of this sale allowed him to buy four acres next door which enabled the business to grow.

About this time Geoffrey began his experiments with the great institution of marriage vows. He married his first wife which did not last very long and there were no children involved. The union with wife number two produced one child.

Wife number three bore him two children. This all took place whilst Geoffrey was motor racing in the late 60's and 70's.

Geoffrey obviously had some talent as he was approached by the famous Car Racing Company, Ecurie Ecosse, to become one of their sponsored drivers. In those halcyon days, it was quite the thing for a bevy of the fairer sex to become flirtatious admirers of the chaps that raced motor cars.

These sorts of activities certainly did nothing to develop longevity in the marriage stakes. So, after three failed marriages, this encouraged Geoffrey to write his first book titled "Divorce Without Remorse".

Geoffrey had two more moves in business. The first took him to Whitby, in Yorkshire, where he operated a large boat yard specializing in fishing and pleasure craft. He then went down to Portsmouth and started Atlanta Marine. This developed an interest in yacht racing which kept his competitive desires engaged, which is good for the soul, and the opportunities to also have a little dally with the ladies.

Fairly serious racing was involved which included three Fastnet races. According to Geoffrey, one needs these sorts of challenges. At Cowes week in 1978 he met Rose (a confirmed seafarer) and this started a long romance which saw them living together in 1979. This enduring partnership became lifelong, continuing for 45 years. According to Rose, she never married him because she did not want to be given the uncomplimentary titles that Geoffrey dealt out to his former three wives. Very wise move, but Geoffrey loved every moment of this long and loving relationship.

Together Rose and Geoffrey started another episode in the long and varied career of these two, when they converted an old Bedford ambulance called Bertha and travelled around the Greek Isles writing travel and yachting guides. This proved very successful and Collins, the publishers, asked them to do Turkey and also the capitals of Europe. An old Vespa scooter was added to the fleet as a more rapid means of investigating the nooks and crannies around the large cities. Imagine the fun they had.

Between Guide books and other writings Geoffrey actually authored 16 books and we all are aware of his efforts which have graced our club magazine. Next move was to France where they lived in Brittany. In 2016 they sold the house in Brittany and moved further south in France to La Lot. This home in Monteraul was a converted bakery called La Ancienne Boulangerie. Several members of our club have been hosted by Rose and Geoffrey at their French homes.

Geoffrey then began his second round of motor racing when he started campaigning in the vintage and classic classes. This covered some 15 years of what is referred to by participants as, 'gentlemen racing'.



Geoffrey

Sir Stirling Moss

Geoffrey overtaking Sir Stirling Moss!!!

On one particular occasion he was competing with, amongst others, the great racing driver Sir Stirling Moss. During this race, Geoffrey caught up to, and passed the famous Sir Stirling. This called for great post- race celebrations.

Quite a feature of gentleman racing as we later observed when Raewyn and I were

fortunate enough to join Rose and Geoffrey at the Spa Motor Racing Circuit in Belgium in 2010. Geoffrey was racing his 1958 A.C. Ace Bristol in the Masters Gentleman Drivers pre-60's Sports Car Class. He also raced his 1958 Cooper Bristol Mk2 in the Historic Grand Prix Class. This was an exciting day for us and we were very pleased that both Geoffrey and his cars both finished unscathed and unbroken.

Geoffrey and Rose made their first trip to New Zealand in the year 2000. They instantly loved the country and lifestyle which saw them move here permanently in 2009. I was thrilled when another so called "petrol head" moved next door to us on Wainui South Road.

In 2011, in France, Geoffrey suffered from a huge accident when helping a neighbour, he fell off a ladder, landing across a wall, which badly injured his back. This left him with an injury from which he never properly recovered.



1958 A.C. Ace Bristol

In summing up the remarkable life of Geoffrey, he could be best described as a "character". You can add as many adjectives as you like to the "character", but to me and many others in our club "character" is what he was. In a life full of adventures, we were so blessed that he spent his latter 15 years enjoying our club and sharing his motoring legacy.

John



1958 Cooper Bristol Mk2