

Dr.Dick Squires MBE

Dr Dick Squires MBE is a Wantage legend. The people of the town owe a great deal to him. Not only did he serve as a local doctor for many years, he along with his wife Kirsty are also largely responsible for the museum building that you are standing in now.

Dick has also been the key player in acquiring Lains Barn at Ardington (seen below, now a venue for weddings and events which income helps fund the museum), along with The Court Hill Centre (prize-winning bunk house) on the Ridgeway and indeed the Betjeman Millennium Park found just a short walk away from where you are now.



Many people in the town will be able to recall a time where they have been involved in one of Dick's many projects or attended one of his infamous parties which were often scattered with his famous friends. Dick also keen to involve local people in the arts, heritage and culture often opened his home and garden to raise awareness of local causes and as a venue for the annual outdoor Shakespearean play.

Educated at Stowe, Dick was renowned for his antics which included much tree climbing, avoiding cricket and utilising the masters vehicles which he had been assigned to maintain. It was during his time at school that he was taught carpentry skills that he then used during the holidays to remain the then family home and that of other local friends. This skill in later life enabled him and Kirsty to renovate a residential ruin in France, along with various projects around Wantage.

Following in his fathers footsteps, Dick decided to also train at St Thomas's Hospital in London to become a doctor. It was during his training he met his future wife Kirsty, who was then a nurse. Kirsty managed to ward off several attempts by Dick to then settle. Following his training Dick then went to work in Shoreham, Chichester, Banbury then eventually Wantage where he remained a GP in the town until 1986.



Growing up in Wantage, Dick's parents were good friends with John and Penelope Betjeman. This is how Dick was inspired to plan a 'road trip adventure' to India. Penelope had previously lived in India and had a great love for Indian architecture. She was keen to explore more and encouraged Dick to plan the overland trip incorporating several other countries of interest en route.

Dick acquired a V.W. campervan along with green canvas and old TV aerials which he used to construct a lean-to tent. Using his mothers sewing machine he also made several homemade sleeping bags for the trip.

A fee of £50 was charged to all fellow travellers; Elizabeth Simson (friend of his sister Jesher), Chris Maycock (known as Bertie who had studied with Dick at St Thomas's), Isobel Knoblick (local Wantage girl who was keen to see her boyfriend who was living in Delhi) and of course Dick's neighbour and family friend, Penelope Betjeman.



Dick and fellow travellers in their homemade sleeping bags



Off they set from Dover, via Vienna, Yugoslavia, Turkey and Tehran. Many adventures were had along the way including Dick receiving 120 bee stings in Pakistan!

The British Council had sent advanced messages to embassies along the route to inform them that John Betjeman's wife was travelling overland to India, with a request to arrange suitable entertainment for them. As such they were entertained at various parties and even stayed at the Institute of Persian Studies in Tehran.

On arriving in India, they visited Delhi, Agra (Taj Mahal) and Varanasi, then returned via Syria, Jordan, Greece, Italy and finally France where he meet up with Kirsty in Paris.

In 1965 Kirsty finally agreed to marry Dick. Together they raised their children Ben (who also became a doctor) and daughter Penny in a medieval cottage near Wantage, before finally moving into the family home next to Wantage's parish church in 1981.

Dick, like his father, became one of the towns local doctors practising out of the Church Street Surgery a few meters from his home. When the surgery decided to relocate to new premises across town Dick decided that the Old Surgery would be the perfect building for the towns fledgling museum collection (then held in the Victoria Cross Gallery) to relocate to. Funds from the sale of district council land at Challow, along with discounted sale costs by the then Surgery Partners and Dicks own funds, the required £20,000 to purchase the building was achieved.



The £80,000 required for the necessary building work for the new museum was funded from cash raised by Kirsty catering for countless weddings at Lains Barn, which volunteers then waitressed for, local donations and a grant from The Carnegie Trust of £15,000. Raising this amount of money mostly from catering was truly a magnificent achievement!

The museum's beginnings were fairly humble compared to that which you see today. A café area supplied visitors with cakes, soups and quiches made by Dick and Kirsty in their home kitchen and carried across the road. The Wantage W.I. Country Market was established, which is still running every Friday, and the Wantage Herald also then rented a room upstairs.

Dick persuaded his friend David Attenborough to do the commentary for free which you can still listen to today in the auditorium.

Notorious for his love of buildings and local heritage, Dick was approached about other local barns that needed restoration. He went on to rescue Lains Barn which is now a major source of the museum's annual income, as well as Hunts Barn which now forms part of the museum gallery and buildings. He also rescued a set of barns by an old quarry on The Ridgeway above Wantage, which became The Court Hill Centre; now an independent bunk house used by walkers, locals and large groups.

Country Market in the Museum



Every Friday

9.30am - 10.45am

The Vale & Downland Museum
19 Church Street, Wantage, OX12 8BL
01235 771447
tourism@wantage-museum.com
Registered charity no. 112066





The Court Hill Centre, now an independent bunk house with an excellent Café, used mainly by those walking The Ridgeway and by large parties such as schools for overnight stays.

Dick unwittingly hit the national news after a sign he put up to help preserve chickens at Lains Barn was removed by the council. The Queen Mother who had heard of Lains Barn and did an impromptu visit to the site while visiting the area to see her Racehorses stabled locally, heard of the chicken sign's removal and decided to help. As a result the sign was reinstated and still remains today!

Dick's last major project's in the town surround his family's late friend Sir John Betjeman. Dick along with a group from the town firstly set out to preserve the last remaining unprotected green space adjacent to the Letcombe brook in Wantage from developers. Sir John Betjeman had lived a short distance away from this land at his home 'The Mead' and he used to walk past this space on his way to church, often picking-up rubbish along his journey. After a lengthy campaign £300,000 was acquired from the council, fundraising and a private benefactor to pay off the building company. As a result the Betjeman Millennium Park was established and can now be enjoyed by all.



The second project was to help campaign for a bust of Sir John to be established in the town. After several years of fundraising along with the backing of the town council and agreement from the museum (where it was to be placed) the bust was finally unveiled in 2016 by Sir John's granddaughter Imogen Lycett-Green, with a reading by Sir Edward Fox.

