



FREEHOUSE focus...

JOHN VEREKER

IT WAS WITH GREAT SADNESS THAT WE LEARNT OF THE PASSING OF JOHN VEREKER CBII IN JANUARY, AGED 87 – A WONDERFUL GENTLEMAN WHOSE KINDNESS, GENEROSITY AND EXPERTISE INSPIRED MANY BII MEMBERS. IN THIS SPECIAL FREEHOUSE FOCUS, WE RETURN TO JOHN AND WIFE CHRISTINE'S FREEHOUSE, THE BELL, AS OUR FAREWELL TO A MUCH LOVED FRIEND OF THE BII. BY KATE OPPENHEIM CBII

The Bell in Horndon-on-the-Hill in Essex is a superb, award-winning and highly rated freehouse that has seen many changes over its 600 years. It could have so easily disappeared into obscurity in the early 1980s, when the through-road on which this old coaching inn was built was blocked off, bringing to an end centuries of passing traffic and custom.

Yet, under the Verekers' ownership, The Bell has thrived, with the original building being extended to make way for new bedrooms and a neighbouring Georgian building acquired to develop into even more accommodation. Today the pub has 26 bedrooms and is featured in *Harden's*, *The Good*

Pub Guide, *Sawday's*, *The Good Food guide* and *ViaMichelin*.

John was a man who never ceased to be ahead of the curve, in terms of understanding the trade and knowing how to push the business forward. The Bell was an early adopter of gastro cuisine, fine wine and great accommodation – all delivered with exceptional service – in a beautiful, traditional pub setting.

His entrepreneurial and business acumen saw him being chosen as a Chief Judge for the BII's Licensee of the Year Awards, forming one half of the formidable judging duo, fondly known as the Two Johns. For over a decade, John visited semi-finalists the length and breadth of Britain

with fellow John, trade expert John Sharratt CBII, a former Mitchells & Butlers Operations Director.

It is true to say that the Two Johns were responsible for building the Licensee of the Year Award's reputation, with semi-finalists anxiously awaiting their visit, knowing they would face a grilling about every element of their operation – but forever grateful for the wise words, inspiration and advice received during and after the visit.

Of course, at the heart of John's industry knowledge and great success was The Bell.

A family business through and through, John and Christine originally took over the pub from Christine's parents in the 1970s. Today, the pub is still run by their relatives and their extended family, their staff – a good number of whom have worked at The Bell for decades.

Daughter-in-law Carol Anne Vereker, who is married to one of John and Christine's sons, Julian, and works in the business, spoke to *BII News* on behalf of Christine and the family. She says: "He was one of those people who never seemed to age, always being full of ideas and enthusiasm, with an immense passion for the pub. John was instrumental in growing the



The Bell's extended family, with John and Christine

TRIBUTES

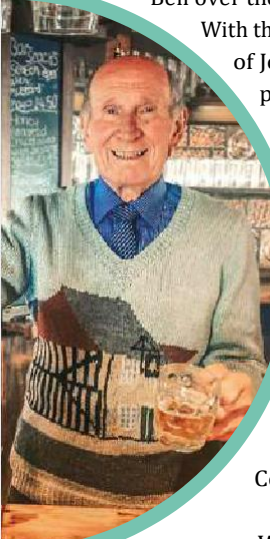
business and kept up-to-date with the trade by reading the industry news and was always thinking about how trends, or the economy, would affect it. He always managed to equate everything back to the business."

The General Manager, Joanne Butler, has forged a successful career at The Bell over the last 40 years.

With the encouragement of John, who was

passionate about training and the need to facilitate career progression, Joanne became a Master Sommelier in 1997.

The pub has won many awards specifically related to its wine offering, as well as for its training. Today there are five team members with wine's WSET Higher Certificate.



While

Joanne runs the The Bell day-to-day, John and Christine's other son, Christopher and his wife Elin both work in the business. Christopher is Head of Grounds and Maintenance and led the ambitious development of the new hotel, built in 2012, while Elin is the book-keeper, having also worked in the restaurant and bar.

Despite being 87 when he died, John never retired but kept on working at The Bell until a few months before his death, remaining astute and innovative as ever.

"John was passionate about everything he did. The Bell was his first love and Christine

supported him, letting him shine. He was always hands-on and instinctively understood the service industry.



The Two Johns: John Sharratt pictured left

his staff first. The food was important, as was what was served in a glass, but he knew that it counted for nothing without the people," says Carol Anne.

John believed fervently that people need to have ambition to want to be part of that business, whether they were in the kitchen, cleaning or front-of-house.

"He looked after his staff and so many former employees have been in touch with the family to say how important John has been in terms of their

career development and life choices. He valued everyone and encouraged them to develop their skills.

"We knew John was special, but until we saw all these comments and received letters of condolence, we hadn't grasped quite how important he was to so many people.

"He truly had a life well lived – and the pub was his passion."

“The minute you walk through the restaurant/bar door, the performance begins. You are on stage!”

“Don't procrastinate. Always do today what you want to put off until tomorrow.”



"I had the privilege of spending many happy hours with JV whilst visiting and interviewing finalists. I developed an enormous respect for him as a man and a licensee. He was a true gentlemen and a wonderful judge of character. He maintained the highest possible professional and personal standards throughout the years he supported the BII and was a tremendous ambassador for the industry."

John Sharratt CBII

"We first met JV during the judging visits of LOYA 2009. The interview was much more than we expected and led us to discovering many holes in our business!

We needed to open our eyes to the bigger picture and not work harder, but be more focused. The amount of free consultancy we took away from that meeting was invaluable and was the beginning of the solid foundations that built the business we still run to this day.

John was a mentor and an amazing example of how the industry looks after its own. He was truly one of a kind. We have so much to be thankful for to both Johns, in the way they took us under their wings and showed us the light.

"Thanks JV - the industry has lost one of its best!"

Ashley & Kelly McCarthy CBII, LOYA winners 2013

"John guided me through the most memorable moments in my life and made my passion for the industry and food explode. He made me see the best in people and how to get the best out of them, and he showed me how people skills are one of the most important ingredients to build an amazing team. He would always tell me: 'You're only as good as your last service', and man, he had one hell of a service."

Stephen Treadwell, Head Chef

"John employed me at a time when people were telling him not to. I think he saw something in me that I didn't see myself. As an 18 year old, unsure about continuing in hospitality, with John's support, I decided to give it some more time and 36 years later I am still in the industry."

Sean Kelly, former Head Chef

"If I could be half the man JV was, then I would be happy. He will be truly missed by staff, ex-staff, customers and local villagers alike."

Stuart Fay, former Head Chef

John always knew that he had to put

