

Text of speech given by Jonathan Cavendish at the unveiling of a Blue Plaque in memory of Robin Cavendish at Drayton St Leonard on Sunday 16 June 2019

Welcome everybody to this small ceremony to celebrate the unveiling of a blue plaque in memory of Robin Cavendish.

A lot of work and support is required to get a commemorative blue plaque approved and erected, and my mother Diana and I would like to thank the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques board, especially Eda Forbes, and the Drayton St Leonard parish council, especially Edward Hayter, for all their efforts.

Before my mother unveils the plaque, I would like to say a few words about my father.

Robin and Diana Cavendish went to live in Kenya in the late 50s, following a fairly whirlwind romance. Robin worked as a tea broker. The sun shone, the lions roared, and the ice tinkled in the glass until tragedy struck. Robin contracted polio, was completely paralysed and had to breathe through a ventilator. He was 28, my mother was 24. He was given days, then weeks to live. My mother gave birth to a charming baby – me – and back we came to England. My father was stuck away in the Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital in Oxford, and unsurprisingly entered a very deep depression.

After about one year in the Nuffield, Robin and Diana made the extraordinary decision to break out of hospital. At that time, 1961, nobody with that severity of disability, entirely reliant on a breathing machine, lived outside hospital. The doctors told him he would be dead in two weeks. A more constructive piece of advice from the medics was that Robin and Diana should live within ten miles of the hospital. Thus, Drayton St Leonard, and Furlongs, now back to its original name The Old Rectory.

They lived an extraordinarily brave and pioneering life. They had the help of friends, but it was their ingenuity and determination that made it possible. Robin soon became frustrated that his huge wheelchair and separate respirator kept him rooted in one spot. He befriended the eccentric genius Teddy Hall, Professor of Archaeological Sciences at Oxford, who had revealed that the Piltdown Man was a fake, and was later to accurately carbon-date the Turin shroud. Teddy and Robin designed a series of wheelchairs that contain an inbuilt breathing machine, which allowed him and a growing number of responauts – the name given to people who require mechanical assistance to breathe – to have much greater mobility and independence.

Robin had a Dormobile van converted into a disabled people carrier, complete with a hydraulic tail lift for his wheelchair. Diana would intrepidly drive him around, steadfastly ignoring his constant stream of driving tips. They travelled all over Europe, visiting friends, famous battlefields and even talking to European doctors to spread the word abroad to encourage and enable severely disabled people to live more fulfilling lives outside hospitals.

Robin firmly believed in pursuing quality of life for himself and his fellow disabled. The house and garden here became an unofficial consultancy centre for advice and help, practical and emotional, to a wide range of disabled people. Indeed, Robin created with customary precision and accuracy the first complete list of Responauts in Britain. The example set by

Robin and Diana's trail-blazing and laughter-filled life was not just an inspiration to the disabled. Robin quickly realised that many people were scared and even put off by disability. He used the full extent of his charisma and charm – he was a man who gave charm a good name – to put people at their ease. He dispensed and received delicious fragments of gossip with pretty girls while also sharing broadly his lightly held wisdom. As his great friend, Archbishop Robert Runcie said in his brilliant address at Robin's memorial service, "Furlongs was far and away the best refuge for the restoration of spirits, as our car breasted Chislehampton hill, we made our eager way in high expectations which were never disappointed."

Robin was keenly aware that holiday breaks were crucial, but unobtainable, for the severely disabled and their carers. In 1970, he and his friend, Dr Geoffrey Spencer, consultant in charge of the Lane Fox unit at St Thomas's hospital, co-founded Refresh, a charity which raised the money for and then ran Netley Waterside House, a holiday complex on Southampton Water, which provided holidays and respite breaks for Responauts and their carers and families, in beautiful surroundings.

Diana and Robin's family have continued to build on his vision, and after his death, CS Disabled Holidays was set up, a flourishing charity which provides funding for holidays for the severely disabled and their families. There is a great and growing demand for this financial assistance, as policies of austerity have almost completely wiped out any contributions from local authorities and other Government sources. Everyone needs a holiday, but for severely disabled people and their carers, we believe it is crucial to the possibility of a contented existence.

Two years ago, the movie *Breathe* was released, portraying the extraordinary lives of Robin and Diana, starring Andrew Garfield and Claire Foy, and beautifully directed by Andy Serkis, another distinguished resident of Drayton St Leonard. The film has been seen and celebrated all over the world, and I have had literally thousands of letters and emails expressing what a powerful impact Robin and Diana's story has had. For those of you who haven't seen it, you can catch it on Netflix. Following the release of the film, in November 2017, Robin and Diana were awarded the prestigious Patient Innovative Achievement award from the Gulbenkian foundation for developing innovations and advocating for people with disability.

Robin died in 1994, here at Furlongs, wildly exceeding all medical estimations of his likely longevity. He enhanced the lives of all who knew him, and he transformed the lives of a great number of disabled people by his practical help and through the example of his pioneering life. He would be proud – but very surprised and amused – to see this plaque in his memory.

For donations to CS Disabled Holidays, please visit our website
<http://www.csdisabledholidays.co.uk/>