

## JOHN GEOFFREY BIRT (S59-63)

He was born on 8 January 1946 in Scotland and along with his brothers **Andrew (S55-58)** and **Stewart (S56-61)** went to the College.

While at the College he excelled in sport and played in 1<sup>st</sup> teams for rugby, hockey and cricket. Rugby was his main game and he recalls being awarded his rugby cap by **Richard Vaughan-Griffith (K60-64)** as captain of the XV together with Mr Melsom who was the Rugby Master at the time. Without telling him, it was Mr Melsom who brought him to the attention of the Scottish Schoolboys' selectors who sent a representative to the College to watch him (also unbeknown to him at the time) in a school match. Subsequently he was selected for the Scottish Schools/English Schools match on New Year's Day 1964 played at the Richmond Athletic Ground. This was despite the fact that he had left the College in December 1963 – he still apparently qualified for inclusion in the team as all those selected had still been at school somewhere the term before.



After leaving the College he went to Sandhurst, where once again he played lots of rugby and went on to play for the Army and Combined Services in various parts of the world. Choosing service in the Gurkhas meant that many postings were in remote locations with no rugby and so there were times when his rugby career was frustrated. However, postings to Hong Kong were fantastic for rugby players and in the Hong Kong team in which he won the first of his caps, there were Old Ispwichians as well.

He suggests that it was the fact that he played rugby in Hong Kong which allowed him, on leaving the Army in 1977, to transition to the commercial world fairly painless, as so many friends who he had met on and off the field were well established Lawyers, Accountants, Bankers. In fact he found that every walk of life was represented and in those days the Military/Civilian network in Hong Kong was very close indeed. It was not difficult to convert social contacts into business contacts.

He played for Hong Kong rugby at international level for a number of years, playing against a variety of other countries including France (when they were on their way to the Antipodes), Japan, Korea plus the lesser rugby countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Sri Lanka. He also opened the bowling for Brunei against Malaysia in 1976 to make his international cricket debut.

In his Army career the highlight was his time as ADC to General Sir Walter Walker KCB, CBE, DSO in 1970/71 when he was Commander-in-Chief of Allied Forces Northern Europe (i.e. boss of NATO from Northern Germany to the Russian border with Norway) including all Land, Air & Naval Forces. It was quite an eye opener for a young Captain to spend so much time with Heads of State, Heads of Governments and a plethora of Generals & Admirals of all nationalities.

On leaving the army he was offered a job with the HK office of the international property consultancy, Richard Ellis, which founded in London in 1773!. He used to enjoy informing their American clients that the company was formed when America was still the 13 Colonies! After 10 years in the HK property market his career took him to Thailand, supposedly for only six months, but 25 years later he is still there and has self employed for the past 18 years. More recently he has taken a back seat and have handed over the day to day running of the business to the younger generation of expats.

In 2013 he was therefore semi-retired and enjoying the time off to spend more time at his home in the north of Thailand. He had great fun building it using recycled teak from old barns and similar structures – see picture on the next page. The house is built in two structures. The one on the right is his bedroom suite while the one on the left has two guest bedrooms on the upper level. The ground floor is left open to the elements as can be seen in the photo on the right, which is taken looking across the dining table to the garden and river beyond. The teak columns were recycled from the house of a former hill tribe chief who had abandoned it for the good life in the city. Each column is 7 metres long and about 70 cms in diameter - very hard to find these days since the ban on cutting forest teak in Thailand came into force some years ago.



In September 2013 he was in Hong Kong where, at the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Hong Kong Rugby Union, he was finally awarded his Cap, almost 45 years after he won his first in early 1969 at the very first Asian Rugby Tournament held in Tokyo. Apparently in those days the HKRFU had little in the way of funds (they even had to purchase their own blazers ... but they did give them a tie!) and could not afford to present actual Caps but now after so many years of the world famous HK Rugby Sevens, the HKRFU has plenty of cash and has decided to present actual Caps to those who won them in the days of yore. The photo above was taken at the time the cap was presented to him in September 2013.

After a brief battle with cancer, John died in Koh Samui, Thailand on 21 May 2016. The following is one of the tributes posted on a hospitality website [www.c9hotelworks.com](http://www.c9hotelworks.com) :-

***Property Legend John Birt Passes Away (author Bill Barnett)***

*One of Southeast Asia's leading property personalities John Birt has passed away. Birt was best known for his extended time in Koh Samui where he led the real estate firm SVH (Samui Villas & Homes).*

*For more than a decade I often called in on John when visiting the island and never tired of his views on the market and rich historical context. He is best remembered as one of those legendary expatriates who came East and never left.*

*A graduate of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in the UK, he served in the Gurkha Brigade for over a dozen years in India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Nepal amongst other postings.*

*In the 1980's he took to property and joined what was Richard Ellis International Property (now CBRE) and in 1988 came to Thailand and formed the Bangkok office of First Pacific Davies. From 1996 onward he started his own firm and advised a number of pioneering developments in Koh Samui. From 2001 onwards he headed up SVH and become and well known authority on island property.*

*John was a throwback to an earlier age and can best be described as an Old World gentleman with a great sense of New World storytelling and keen personality.*

*His cremation will take place on Sunday May 29th in Koh Samui at the Bophut Tha Ram Wat. For more details contact Khun Pai by email at [pai@luxuryvillasandhomes.com](mailto:pai@luxuryvillasandhomes.com)*