

# THE ANDRÉ L SIMON LECTURE 2013

Presented by

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## **“My Wife and Hard Wines”**

Firstly I must explain that my wife has been with me throughout my career and sat at my side for 20 years taking notes at lectures, talks and tastings. I can't taste, hold a glass, speak *and* take notes, so she has been terribly important and it is to her that this talk is dedicated.

The title of my talk is a bit of a joke. It will be the sub-title of my last book, if I ever get around to it. Some of the American members present will be familiar with one of my very favourite authors, Mark Twain, author of Huckleberry Finn, who wrote the shortest autobiography in history, (19 pages): “My Life and Hard Times”, so I have just changed it to “My Wife and Hard Wines”.

My original brief was to give you an oration but there is insufficient time, so Andrea advised me that you would all know about the Wine and Food Society, so talk about something else, **me** - one of my favourite subjects!

I have had a very fortunate life, which I can only briefly say is that I moved from place to place with the most extraordinary alacrity. This was due to serendipity rather than luck. Now I don't know if you are aware of the term serendipity, but it is an event or person which leads, sometime later, and in a totally different context, to an unanticipated happy and profitable outcome.

After school, I couldn't join the century-old family firm as my father had sold out. But I could draw rather well so my mother asked me “Why don't you train as an architect?” I started at the Bartlett School of Architecture. After only one year I had to join the army. I was a terribly bad soldier but I did enjoy my last posting which was at Dover Castle where I was the assistant adjutant, assistant organist and assistant librarian but I was doing none of those jobs very seriously. I was down in the town, drinking coffee and ogling the girls [laughter from the audience]. After

four years I resumed my architectural studies. It was awful. I was workshy. In my final year I was faced with two examinations – one was engineering. I knew nothing about that, the other was ‘drainage and sanitation’. I looked through the questions and I couldn’t answer any of them, so I walked out. By then I realised architecture wasn’t for me, and that I must do something else.

The next bit of luck was again due to my mother – I didn’t know what on earth to do – I was sketching a lot and I exhibited – but she saw an advertisement in The Times personal column, which was strange as I thought she only read the Manchester Guardian and the Oldham Chronicle. ‘Laytons Wine Merchants’ had an opening for a trainee, “apply in writing”, which I did. Later, in one of Tommy Layton’s books he wrote that the main reason for taking me on was that he admired my architectural Italianate hand writing. Layton had a retail wine business, a wine restaurant and had opened one of the first wine bars in London. He was a bit of a scholar, but behaved like a charlatan. One of the best things was his ‘Circle of Wine Tasters’, which the staff called ‘wine wasters’. I joined and learnt a lot about wine. Although he was eccentric and difficult at times, we got on very well. A few days after I had joined he gave me some of the best advice I was ever given “Michael, when you taste a wine, make a note.” I rushed out and bought a little red book and made my first note on September 17<sup>th</sup> 1952: a modest Graacher. But on the same page I noted Graham ’24 and on the next page, another vintage port, an 1897 magnum of Tuke Holsworth. For the entire year I was paid £300! But it was a marvellous year, at the end of which I went to Portugal. In those days you sailed on a cargo boat which plied regularly from the London docks to Oporto, Bordeaux, Charente and Jerez. Whilst waiting for the tide to change at London docks, I did a couple of pen and wash sketches. Then for 2½ days, as there was nothing to do, I sat at the stern of the ship and drew the back of the boat. When we arrived at Oporto, the ship had to wait for the tide to change to get across the sandbar. Oporto was destitute. The Port trade was at a low ebb and it was thought there was no future at all for it. Then I went to Jerez to visit sherry bodegas, afterwards to Gibraltar where I awaited a P & O Liner to London. As it happened I had been given by an old army friend an introduction: “If you care to call on my fiancé, she lives near Gibraltar”. As I had nothing else to do I said “Why not”. Unhappily she was ill in bed. However, her father kindly invited me to stay to dinner. It turned out he was a director of wine merchants, Saccone & Speed. He said if you would like a job in the wine trade, come and meet my Chairman, who was based in Gibraltar. He, in turn, gave me an introduction to the Managing Director of Saccone’s in

London who offered me a job. So, from sweeping cellars, and delivering wine in a 'van ordinaire', I became a young gentleman in the wine trade: – I wore a Savile Row suit, a bowler hat, stiff white collar and carried a furled umbrella. Everyone in the wine trade wore a bowler hat whether you were the boss, or somebody like me, a sales assistant; it was a wonderful time.

After a couple of years I joined Harveys of Bristol. Soon I was posted to Manchester - they 'sent a thief to catch a thief'. All my life I had been trying to get away from 'the North'. But the work was very creative, my boss was a delightful man, George Delaforce, the local director known to all his many friends as 'Wog'. He was a larger than life character and great fun. But I always avoided him on a Monday morning. But one morning a personable young lady came in with an appointment to see Mr Delaforce. Her name was Dodie Pickup, a presentable lady in the second flush of youth. She and 'Wog' were incarcerated for two hours. It turned out that turning on the charm, she was trying to persuade Harveys to provide the wine at the first dinner of the new mid-Cheshire branch of The Wine and Food Society. Of course she got her own way. The opening dinner was held at the Grosvenor Hotel in Chester, and André Simon was the guest of honour. I had met him, but only briefly before. He charmed everyone with his French accent, and wit. When there was a call for the chef, André turned to him and said "This is the worst meal I have ever had in my life" and went through each course saying what was wrong. Most of us had never heard anything like this before. Nor had the chef who burst into tears and left. However, I do think it is inappropriate and very foolish to call for the chef if it has been a lousy meal.

Back to Christie's. When I was with Harveys London office in King Street, I used to go into Christie's regularly to look round the galleries and nursed a secret desire to work for a great company of international reputation. But then I forgot all about it because Christie's, at that time, didn't auction wine. However, about 10 years later, when I had become the UK Sales Director of Harveys, less and less I had to do with wine and was feeling like a change.

There was a rumour (in 1965) that Christie's were thinking of restarting wine auctions. Out of the blue I wrote a letter to the Chairman saying that the wine market was fragmented and potentially a very good time to start. A long story, but with the support of my old friend Harry Waugh, was taken on. Of course, I knew nothing about auctioneering. Yet I predicted that in the first year wine sales might

be about £¼ million, the following year double and in due course £900,000. Once we reached a £million would be profitable, I also suggested that Christie's would be needing a man with trade experience, aged between 25 and 35 (I was 28 at the time), with a salary exceeding £3000 p.a. Christie's merely offered me £3,300 which I promptly accepted, the Chairman saying "Broadbent, it's up to you!" My knees went to jelly.

Happily, the Christie's partners, were not only grandly connected but all terribly nice. They left me completely to my own devices. Our opening sale on October 11 1966 was a success. Towards the end of the first season, May 31 (1967), we had a sale which put us on the map. How do these things happen? It happened because Patrick Lindsay, whose father was Premier Earl of Scotland, introduced the Marquess of Linlithgow who said that my brother and I had a collection of old Madeira, some of which was drinkable and some not. I said can I come to see the cellar? At first no reaction, but eventually I was invited to visit Hopetoun House, near Edinburgh. I was taken, by a former girlfriend, to the front door. It was very dark and I couldn't see any knocker or bell. Eventually the door opened. I had timed it beautifully because his Lordship and his butler were just putting on their jackets. They had both been watching the Miss World competition on TV. Lord Linlithgow quickly put me at my ease. All the aristocrats that I have ever met were all terribly kind, except one! Linlithgow had all the Hopetoun treasures, in trust, and confessed that he had only £2,000 cash to spend! (this was 1966).

The next morning I took stock of a wide range of very old wines including a very rare 1911 Sandeman port, the only shipper to 'declare' to celebrate George V's coronation. On the doorstep, as I was leaving, Linlithgow showed me a list of wines owned by his neighbour, the Earl of Rosebery, saying "Harry has got a lot of wine, but he is 'getting on', and was drinking very little these days. It would be well worth following up." Lord Rosebery's Dalmeny estate was as big as the size of Edinburgh. He had a perfect cellar and a marvellous collection of great wines. I next went to Mentmore, a vast Victorian pile in Hertfordshire. In the cellar they had another great range of Lafite (his mother was a Rothschild). It was a long job, single-handedly checking and sticking on slip labels. The combined Dalmeny and Mentmore cellars included 1858 6 mags; a single bottle of the great 1864 Lafite, (Queen Victoria was serving the same wine at dinner parties 10 years later). An unprecedented range of 1865s, which included 2 triple mags (jeroboams); 16 double mags; some 1871s; 1874s; 38 mags and 50 bottles, all Lafite in immaculate

condition. There were many other rare wines including an 1851 port. It was amazing. Still perfect.

The ensuing sale was a huge success. The catalogue title page was impressive ..... ‘Finest & Rarest wines from Private Cellars, the properties of The Most Honourable the Marquess of Linlithgow; The Rt Hon the Earl of Rosebery KT, The Dowager Countess of Sandwich, the Rt Hon the Lord Bruntisfield, Colonel Ian Anderson, Major J S C Magnay and Mrs V A Watney (whom I did not like: – I made the mistake of valuing, in detail, all her wines, which she then sold to her friends – that taught me a lesson). The two triple magnums of Lafite sold for £125 and £155 respectively. A large sum at that time. The first was bought by Mark Birley of Annabels, who, to my horror, opened and drank it the very next day, the other was bought by a charming American in San Francisco where he kept it for a year to let it settle. It was perfect.

The last sale of the 1966/67 season, was on 17 July and I was put into the rostrum at very short notice. I had been sitting in on all 32 wine auctions. I was terribly nervous, of course. The first ten lots were miniature bottles of liqueurs and virtually impossible to sell because the amount of duty far outweighed the value of the contents. However, to my surprise a man in the front row bought all of them and then left the room. It was an enormous relief. About a fortnight later we received a letter from a gentleman saying that his friend, *Mr So and So*, had, alas, made a mistake. He had recently come out of a ‘home’, and thought he was buying picture miniatures! I thought, what on earth should I do? My second in command, Alan Taylor-Restell, an experienced auctioneer, solved the problem. But had I known at that time that my first ten lots had been bought by a man just out of a mental institution, I would have lost my nerve forever.

Christie’s went from strength to strength. There were all the great pristine cellars: Glamis Castle, Sir William Gladstone, Fasque, The Duke of Buccleuch and other grandees. A ‘pristine cellar’ is a cellar which houses wine which has never been moved since the first purchase. In each instance, the second generation of the family, even the third generation simply didn’t understand old wines. The bottles had remained unopened.

I will just deal with one such ‘pristine cellar’: Glamis Castle. Most of these major sellers around this time were introduced to me by wine merchants I met during my

days at Harveys. Glog's of Perth (the Famous Grouse whisky) supplied Glamis with everyday wine. But there in the cellars was a shelf with 42 magnums of 1870 Lafite which had never been moved. The butler of the day kept a meticulous cellar book and I discovered that the 1870 Lafite had been bought by the 13<sup>th</sup> Earl of Strathmore in 1878. A keen collector, he actually bought 48 magnums, but didn't like the wine. He tried it and found it absolutely undrinkable and then he tried another magnum and didn't like this either. The 14<sup>th</sup> Earl tried it and also decided to leave it. The 1870 Lafite was one of these rare wines which took fifty years to mature before it became drinkable. First though we had to get permission from the trustee, who, to say the least, was a little bit difficult. The trustee, Lord X, saw me in my working clothes and couldn't believe I was a director of Christie's and that we were serious. But eventually he gave us permission and we rushed it down to Perth. There was some urgency because Sotheby's had just started wine auctions for the first time (Christie's had been auctioning wines since 1766) and on the board was a member of the Bowes-Lyon family. I thought that before they hear about this I had better get it in the catalogue.

But I suddenly had a slight worry that perhaps the 13<sup>th</sup> Earl had been right and that it **was** undrinkable. I felt we had to open a magnum to taste. I organised a lunch at Christie's with London's leading Bordeaux experts including, Harry Waugh, Hugh Johnson, and Cyril Ray. The magnum looked impressive, perfect level, perfect cork; it was deep in colour; nose perfect, no oxidation and not acetic – it was the most beautiful wine, certainly the most memorable I have ever tasted.

The Americas saga started in a strange way. Harveys London office was on the corner of St James's Square and King Street. Christie's was just a couple of blocks away. There, in the late 1950s, I met the Chairman of Heubleins, importers of Bristol Cream. With them, Sandy McNally, who was the head of their Fine Wine Department.

Out of the blue, about ten years later, I received a telephone call, "Michael would you like to conduct the first wine auction in America?" I always said yes to everything, so the first of what was to be an annual event was in 1969, just three years after joining Christie's.

I was a bit nervous beforehand. However, I had prepared the catalogue and I enjoyed the challenge. Soon I realised that I was a performer, looking and sounding more English than the English, in a morning coat with a carnation.

The first two Heublein wine auctions had been in Chicago. For the second, I had to collect from Mrs James de Rothschild's cellar in London a jeroboam of 1864 Lafite – probably Lafite's greatest ever vintage. I had the big bottle on the seat next to me on the plane, and on arrival walked towards the exit to pose, cradling it, with two armed policemen either side. Good publicity of course. However, the problem was it didn't sell. It failed to reach its \$10,000 reserve. What Heubleins were going to do with it was not my problem, but hoped they were going to keep it in a cool place. Nine years later, the same bottle came up for sale again – it had been cunningly stated that 'the previous owner had very generously left it for other people to have a chance to buy'. This time it sold to a Memphis restaurateur, Mr John Grisanti, who, later that summer, wrote inviting me to pay \$1000 a plate to attend a charity dinner. I was disinclined to pay, nor would Christie's, but, as it happened I was due to take a sale in Houston two days later, so I was able to attend. I was met by Mr Grisanti and taken to his home to collect the bottle. He had an underground cellar, with a circular steel staircase, but the minute it was opened I smelt vinegar. The bottle had a wet cork, it was very ullaged. However, I carried it diligently up the stairs, banged my head on the ceiling and nearly dropped it. There was a motorcade to the Holiday Inn, where I was greeted by television cameras and reporters who, by then, were more interested in what might turn out to be the most expensive vinegar in the world. After its rest, the bottle was taken down to the ballroom where about one hundred people had paid to attend a memorable dinner.

I drew the cork, what was left of it, and arranged six decanters just below. It is always tricky to decant such a large bottle and used a method that wouldn't be allowed (in public) these days. I lowered a plastic tube into the bottle, taking care to avoid disturbing the sediment, and then briefly sucked the end of the tube, the wine filling one decanter after another. I poured some into my glass from one of the decanters. Of course it was acetic, known as 'pricked' in the trade. I smelt it, nodding sagely, and passed it to Mr Grisanti saying you must, of course, have the first taste. In turn he nodded sagely, whereupon I announced "Ladies and gentlemen, tonight you are not drinking just wine but history". [laughter]. Because, when General Sherman, in 1864, started marching across to Georgia, his Union troops were based in Memphis". I then went on to say that the actual wine in the

bottle was made from grapes that were picked that very year, and it was probably bottled in 1865, the year Lincoln was assassinated. Every guest, reverently, sipped a bit of history.

I think, really, I had saved the occasion because had I not gone to Memphis to handle the jeroboam, somebody else less qualified would have drawn the cork, dismissing it as undrinkable. It could have ruined the evening.

In 1971 Heubleins third auction took place in San Francisco, a city I love. At that time, it was what I call 'The Age of Innocence': Americans were really starting in earnest to learn about wine and flocked to the big pre-auction tastings. There were usually about 400 people to taste a lot of wine, mainly those sold by Heubleins. But on the top table was a range of 14 or 15 rare wines. Sandy and I, at intervals, took it in turns to draw a cork, 'nose', taste and talk about each wine. On this occasion – 1971 - André Tchelistchef, who was the doyen of the California wine producers, sauntered in. Sandy asked him if he would like to open a rare bottle and talk about it? He said yes and we handed him a bottle of 1898 Lafite. He drew the cork, carefully decanted it, and poured a little into his glass. After a pause he said, in an accent, a mixture of white Russian, French and American: "Appreciating old wine is like making love to an old lady." As you can imagine the whole room went into a shocked silence. He went on, "It is possible" – sniff, sniff – "it can even be enjoyable" – pause – "but it requires a *leetle* bit of imagination." [raucous laughter]. Seriously, if you have been drinking ordinary wine or even fairly decent claret and are suddenly faced with a very, very old wine it is a different ball game. You have to re-adjust and need to be quite experienced – so André Tchelistchef was quite right.