

SIR ROGER GIBBS – Taken from the Daily Telegraph, 15th October 2018

Sir Roger Gibbs, who has died aged 83, was the scion of a City dynasty who transformed the fortunes of the Wellcome Trust, the UK's biggest medical research charity.

Roger Gibbs made his name in the Square Mile as a popular, astute and forward-looking chairman of the Lombard Street discount house Gerrard & National. After an encounter with cancer in 1974, he devoted a significant portion of his energies to medical charities in gratitude for his survival, and was appointed a governor (trustee) of Wellcome in 1983.

Since its foundation in 1936 as the legacy of the pharmaceutical magnate Sir Henry Wellcome, the trust had been the sole shareholder of the company he created, latterly known as Wellcome Foundation. Gibbs supported the trust's then chairman, the former BP chief Sir David Steel (they were the only trustees from the business world on a board otherwise comprised of scientists) in the view that its future would be more secure if its asset portfolio was more diverse.

Gibbs had in mind the example of the Nuffield Foundation, which his father had chaired and which had been disadvantaged by the wish of William Morris, Lord Nuffield, that it should hold shares in the Morris Motor Co in perpetuity.

Accordingly, Steel and Gibbs oversaw the flotation of Wellcome Foundation in 1986; a quarter of the shares were sold for £200 million – almost 10 times the trust's existing cash reserves.

By the time Gibbs succeeded as chairman in 1989, the market value of the company had multiplied and the case for another share sale was compelling. Gibbs's determination to reduce the trust's holding below 50 per cent – despite opposition from the company, which was prospering from sales of the anti-Aids drug Retrovir but fearful of takeover – was supported by the High Court, which ruled that the trustees' duty to maximise value overrode restrictions in Sir Henry Wellcome's will.

The second sale of Wellcome shares, the largest of its kind in London at that time, went ahead in July 1992, raising £2.3 billion. Three years later, part of the proceeds was deployed to buy the 54-acre Henry Smith's Charity estate in Kensington, in a deal personally negotiated between Gibbs and the banker Lord Kindersley for Smiths.

The Charity Commission warned Gibbs the purchase was a gamble and he later acknowledged "they were right" – but the long-term rise of London real estate generated another huge windfall.

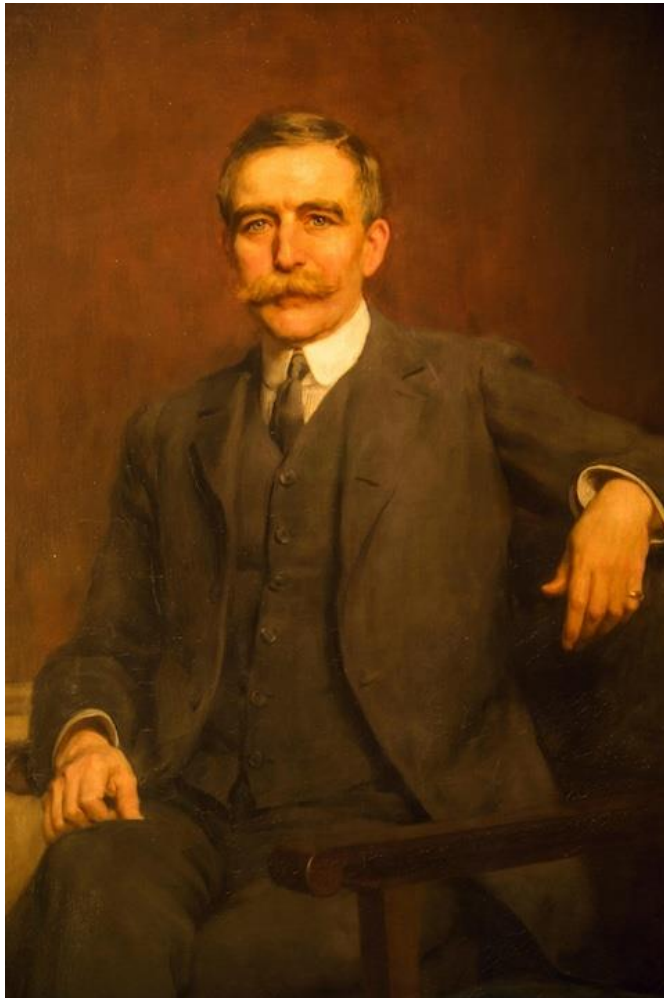
Meanwhile, the trust still held 40 per cent of Wellcome and had given assurances it would not sell down further for five years. But in early 1995 the rival Glaxo drug company launched a bid valuing the trust's remaining shareholding at £3.7 billion against a market price of £2.2 billion; again the company's directors were fiercely opposed, not least for fear of job losses, but the price was too good to refuse.

The end-result of Gibbs's strategy was that Wellcome Trust became for a time (until the advent of the Gates Foundation in the US) the richest charity in the world; it was able to increase its annual funding for medical research such as the human genome

project from £50 million in 1989 to £400 million by the time he stood down in 1999. At his retirement, his deputy chairman addressed him as “the Wizard of Wellcome”.

Roger Geoffrey Gibbs was born on October 13 1934, into a family whose business was the merchant bank Antony Gibbs & Co, founded in 1808 and originally concerned with selling English cloth to Spain and importing guano from Latin America; the founder’s son Hucks Gibbs, 1st Lord Aldenham, was a friend of Brunel who helped finance the Great Western Railway.

Roger’s father Sir Geoffrey was chairman of Antony Gibbs (now part of HSBC) and of the Australia & New Zealand Bank. His uncle Walter, 4th Lord Aldenham, was chairman of the Westminster Bank. Another uncle, Sir Humphrey Gibbs, was governor of Southern Rhodesia at the time of UDI; and his mother Helen was the daughter of the cricketer C F H Leslie, who played in the English team that regained the Ashes in Australia in 1883. Among Roger’s five siblings was Christopher Gibbs, the antiques dealer and style guru of the “Chelsea Set”.



Portrait of Henry Solomon Wellcome by Hugh Goldwin Rivière, 1906 CREDIT: THE WELLCOME COLLECTION,

Roger had much to live up to, but made an unpromising start. At 17 he was moved from Eton to Millfield on what he called “a free transfer”, in the hope he might flourish under a different teaching regime; a gangly youth, he was ruled out for National Service by a weak knee.

In 1954 his father fixed him a job in the City discount house of Jessel Toynbee, where for six months he was a messenger before beginning to make his mark – not least for a facility in mental arithmetic fuelled by familiarity with betting odds. As his first boss Dick Jessel observed approvingly, “this chap knows 13-to-8 is more than 6-to-4 without having to work it out”.

Gibbs became a director of Jessel Toynbee in his mid-twenties, but found the discount market (which intermediated between banks and the Bank of England for short-term money and dealt in bills of exchange) “a bit narrow”. In 1964 he moved to the stockbrokers de Zoete & Gorton, later de Zoete & Bevan, where he joined the partnership and became a rising star, and in 1971 he moved again to Gerrard & National, where he was offered the opportunity to manage the recently merged firm and in due course to succeed as chairman.

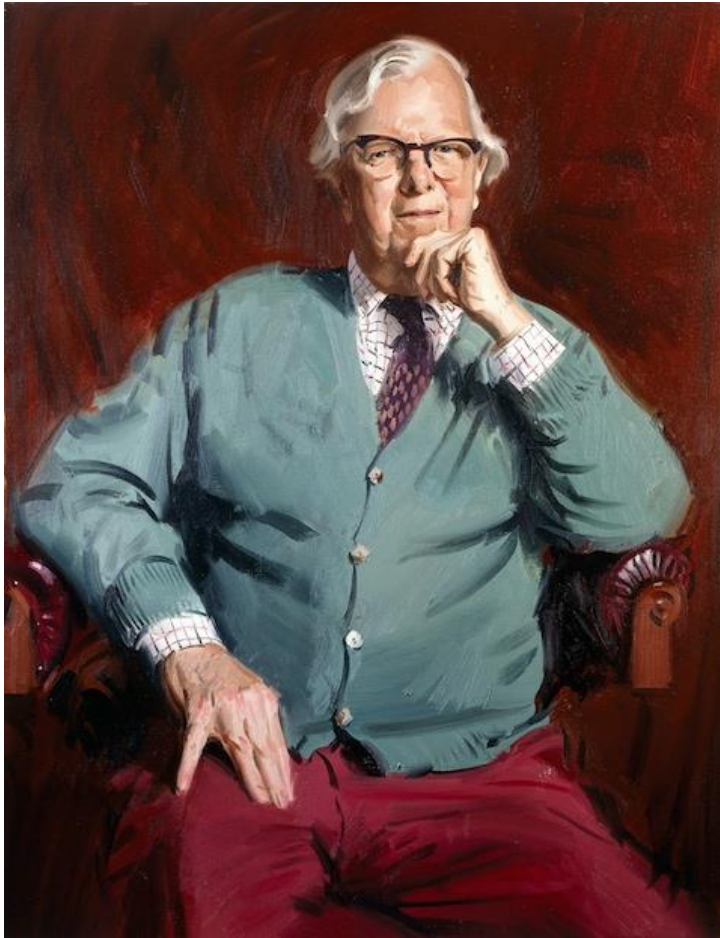
Under his leadership from 1975 to 1989, Gerrard’s business diversified from the traditional discount house role into futures trading, gilt-edged market-making and other new areas, including a foothold in US markets, but remained independent during the merger manoeuvres of the Big Bang era. By 1987 Gibbs was able to tell his shareholders: “It looks as if we are becoming successful as a small international securities specialist.”

His style of leadership, according to one colleague, was “headmasterly but unacademic”, gently encouraging his team to explore new avenues and give of their best. He maintained excellent relations with the Bank of England, and his self-deprecating charm won friends throughout the business world.

He chaired the London Discount Market Association in 1984-86 and was also chairman of the Howard de Walden Estate, which owns much of Marylebone. In 1994 he was lined up to become chairman of the Savoy hotel group when it became entangled in a bid battle with Rocco Forte. He returned to the financial arena in 2000 as chairman of Fleming Family & Partners.

His commitment to medical charity work began in 1975, when he joined the council of the Royal National Pension Fund for Nurses, with which there was a family connection; in 1982 he ran the London Marathon to raise £440,000 for a scanner for Guy’s Hospital, where he became a special trustee; he was a council member of the Imperial Cancer Research Fund and a director of the London Clinic.

He was knighted in 1994, and the headquarters of the Wellcome Trust was later renamed the Gibbs Building in tribute to him. Also a trustee of the Winston Churchill Memorial Foundation, he relished fundraising challenges – pulling in £40 million from his City contacts book for St Paul’s Cathedral as chairman of its foundation from 2000 to 2006.



Sir Roger Gibbs CREDIT: WELLCOME COLLECTION/ANDREW FESTING

Sport was another important aspect of Gibb's life. For more than 25 years he was a director of Arsenal football club – at the invitation of his sometime flatmate Peter Hill-Wood, whose family were major shareholders there. He also liked cricket and golf, but his ultimate preference was for “minority sports where there was a better chance to shine”, notably real tennis, which he played chiefly at Lord's and, more dangerously, the Cresta Run.

His introduction to the high-speed toboggan track came through his Eton friend John Bingham, later Lord Lucan – with whom he also shared a youthful enthusiasm for greyhound racing, the pair briefly operating as a Sporting Chronicle tipster under the joint nom de plume of “G.V.S. Trent Baxter”.

In 1959, Lucan told Gibbs: “You look pasty-faced and in need of exercise. We're going out to St Moritz to ride the Cresta. Why don't you come?” Despite a bad crash on the ice course in 1965, Gibbs was a regular Cresta runner for many years and a celebrated president of its parent, the St Moritz Tobogganning Club, whose finances he also rebuilt.

One activity Gibbs did not find time for until he was 70 was matrimony; in 2005 he married his long-time companion Jane Lee, née Harris, who survives him.

Sir Roger Gibbs, born October 13 1934, died October 3 2018