

Donald Montagu Gerard Chidson MC OBE (1920–2001) **Secretary and Director General of The Caravan Club 1951–1985**

Donald Chidson was born in Gillingham, Kent, in May 1920, the son of Montagu Reaney Chidson and his Dutch wife Marie Josephine. His father was a captain in the Royal Garrison Artillery who rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the Royal Artillery during World War II.

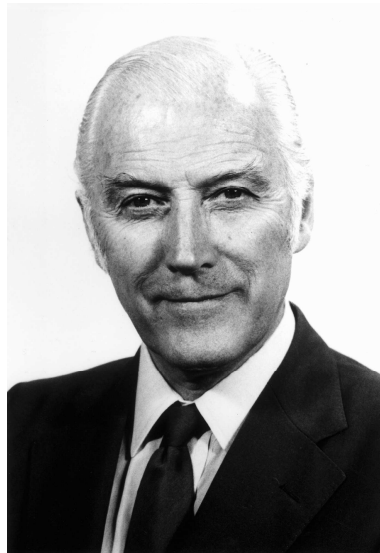


Figure 1: Donald Chidson

He went to Clifton College, Bristol (mirroring the early years of The Club's founder, J. Harris Stone) where he coxed the college rowing four and represented the school at running, fencing, boxing and swimming. He then went on to study French at Grenoble University. He left university to join the Army at the outbreak of World War II, serving with the Inns of Court regiment and the 4th Tank Regiment, seeing active service in Eritrea, the Western Desert and Italy. In 1941, during the break out from Tobruk, he took his tank beyond the enemy position and came under heavy shellfire. Even after his tank was stopped, he continued to fight, inflicting considerable damage on the enemy – action that earned him the Military Cross. For some time he was on

the staff of an Armoured Division and a Ghurka Brigade. After the war he continued his education at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, studying economics and history.

In 1946 he married Barbara Sampson, a secretary and daughter of John Sampson, a captain in the merchant navy. Barbara was also a cousin of Bill Whiteman's first wife, which provided a link to The Caravan Club. They had a son and daughter.

Administrative experience in commerce followed and he joined the chemicals group Morgan Crucible, but left in 1951 to join The Caravan Club as Secretary, changing his title to Director General in 1971. He was instrumental in the Club gaining its independence from Link House Publications and in increasing its membership from 7,000 when he joined to a quarter of a million by the time he left.

Following divorce from his first wife, in 1959 he married Joan Godfrey, an actress and daughter of a captain in the Artists' Rifles. This marriage also failed but he married again in 1980, to Valerie Russell, a Club employee who had headed both the Certificated Locations and Public Relations departments.

A dapper man, he was small in stature but large in personality and was probably loved and loathed in equal measure. He was on a mission to bring 'men of the world' to the Executive Committee to balance what he sometimes saw as the narrow viewpoint of caravan rally-goers, who had worked their way up from Centre level. He would regularly trawl the lists of new members to find those with appropriate experience, and such people would inevitably find themselves invited to a casual lunch. More than one unsuspecting member was successfully lured into this trap and few were able to say 'no' to a more active role in The Club when subject to Chidson's persuasive powers.

Described as a 'larger than life character' and 'a man of outstanding ability', he wasn't afraid to confront people or speak his mind. A colleague recalled him cornering the Group Managing Director of a national motoring

organisation at a social occasion and saying, 'I have to tell you, I despise you.' The MD apparently replied, 'Don't worry, Donald, the feeling is mutual.'

The ramifications of his two failed marriages and other liaisons caused consternation in the Club's Executive Committee, particularly when it threatened to damage certain business relationships, and it was probably only the unswerving loyalty of certain allies that kept Chidson in the Club's employ during these times.

His extreme self-belief also brought him into conflict with the Club's Executive Committee on more than one occasion. But Chidson's strategy of co-opting people he wanted on the Executive Committee and Club Council ensured most of his ideas eventually won through. The irony is it was Chidson's efforts that transferred the Club into the hands of its members, and thus its elected officers, rather than continue to be beholden to the directors of a publishing company.

That is not to say the Chairman of the time automatically disagreed with Chidson's ideas. A fair few acknowledged that it was largely Chidson's drive that took the Club out of the doldrums and forward into a new era.

As well as increasing membership figures, Chidson was instrumental in the creation of a network of both leased and freehold Sites and Certificated Locations, believing the provision of pitches was the Club's most important role. The creation of Sites out of otherwise derelict land was also important to him, and he was proud of the many awards the Club received for such developments. He also believed in offering a wide range of member services, which included insurance, travel, practical courses and a lively magazine. He wanted the Club to be publicly accepted among non-caravanners through wise policies, consideration for others and good behaviour on the road and on Site. He believed the Club should be at the forefront of all matters relating to caravanning and the first port of call for an authority considering legislation, or an individual wanting advice. He fostered good relations with national organisations including the Campaign to Protect Rural England (of which he

was a longstanding member), the National Trust and the Keep Britain Tidy Group, where he was on its first Executive Committee. Through all this, he still endeavoured to retain the true spirit of caravanning, and what he referred to as the ethos of a members' Club.

He was particularly proud that HRH The Duke of Edinburgh agreed to become Patron in 1952, and of the miniature caravan presented to Prince Charles and Princess Anne in 1955.

He retired in May 1985, shortly after receiving an OBE for services to tourism, and his farewell portrait stands in the Club's dining room at its East Grinstead head office.

His retirement provided time to develop his interest in local politics, which started with the role of councillor for his home village of Waldron in 1983. In the late eighties he served as chairman of Wealden's leisure and amenities committee, playing a prominent role in transforming a disused stretch of railway into the 11-mile Cuckoo Trail for cyclists, riders and walkers. He became Conservative Leader of the Council for Wealden from 1990 to 1995, a role taken over by his wife, Valerie.

Chidson died from a brain tumour in 2001, but had the foresight to commit his thoughts about the Club and its personalities to paper, which provides a valuable insight into his time in its employ, and his own character.

Extract taken from:

Ellis, C., 2006. *The history of The Caravan Club*. East Grinstead: The Caravan Club.

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