

1

# A SHORT JOURNEY THROUGH THE LIFE AND TIMES OF ROBERT (BOB) PARSONS

BY MICHAEL CLAYDON

---

©MICHAEL CLAYDON

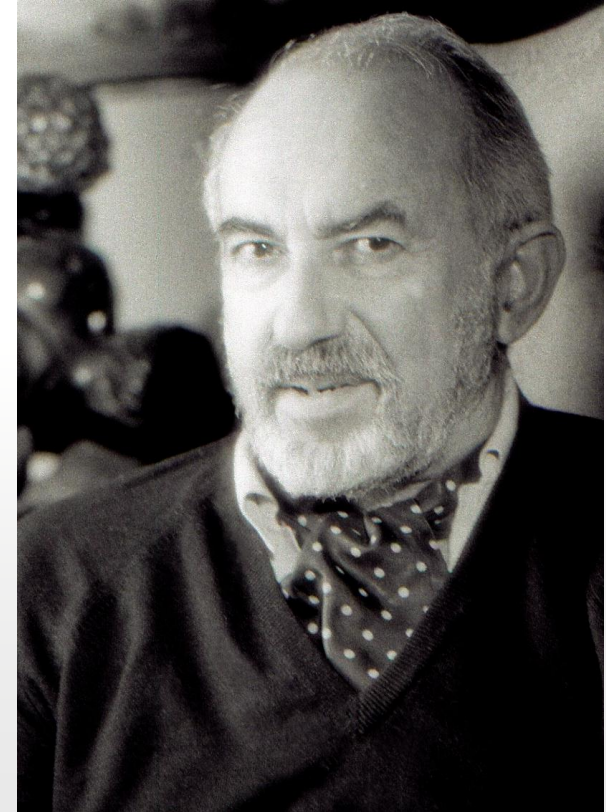
ORIGINAL BOB PHOTOGRAPHS 



---

BOB WAS BORN  
ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO  
AUGUST 2<sup>ND</sup> 1920.

2



Portrait of Bob taken by his friend Mike Henton

# GRANDPARENTS



Bob's grandparents on his mothers' side were Giovanni Satriano, alias (Louis Bodan) and Julia Cerchi. Giovanni was naturalized in 1886 and in 1903 he purchased 160 acres of land in Johnson County Wyoming.

*Giovanni probably changed his name due to anti-immigrant sentiment in the USA.*

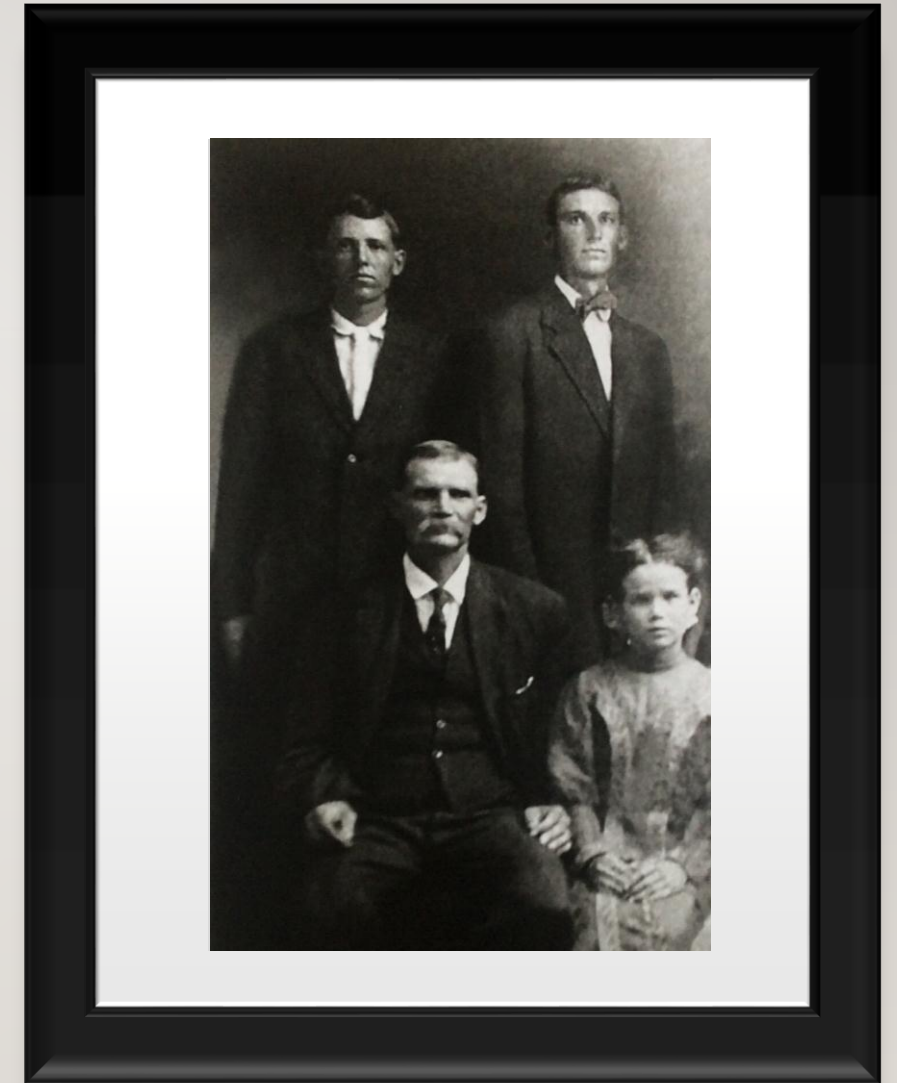


# GRANDPARENTS

---

Grandfather Parsons, William, was born 1865 and died 1913, he first married Nancy Wyatt they separated, he then married Mary McWilliams.

Grandfather Parsons with his son's Ted, Frank (Bob's father), and seated is Laura, Mary's daughter.





# PARENTS

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 1919 Rose Bodan married Frank Parsons at Buffalo, Wyoming. Rose was from Wyoming and was 26, Frank came from Kentucky and was 31. Rose was a graduate of Chicago Musical College and Frank a geologist.

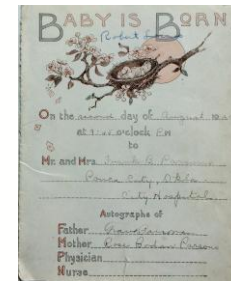


# A TEXAS CHILDHOOD

---

Bob was born at 9.45pm at  
Ponca city hospital, Oklahoma.  
He was christened Robert Louis.

Far right – pictured Bob's baby  
boots which I still have, he is  
wearing the boots in his  
photograph.





# A TEXAS CHILDHOOD

---

Bob's brother Donald (Don) was born at Marlin, Falls County, Texas on July 5<sup>th</sup> 1923. He was christened Donald Bliss (Bliss his fathers middle name).





# A TEXAS CHILDHOOD

---



Bob and Don grew up in Wichita Falls, they had a happy childhood provided by loving parents.

In later life after both parents had passed away, Bob and Don became distant, Don survived Bob by 13 years, he was living in New York where he died in 2013.

# A TEXAS CHILDHOOD

---

This picture was drawn on laundry packing paper by a very young Bob, it shows he had an early interest in architecture! The picture is in the National Trust collection at Newark Park.





# A TEXAS CHILDHOOD - SCHOOL

---

Bob attended the Benjamin Franklin Elementary School and later, Hardin Junior College, Wichita Falls.

Hardin Junior College became Midwestern University in 1950.



Hardin Junior College



# A TEXAS CHILDHOOD

---

Bob with classmates at Benjamin  
Franklin school.



Bob

# A TALL TEENAGER

---

Bob aged 16 standing tall at a Christmas presentation ceremony in his hometown, Bob had won the refrigerator he is standing beside!





# SENIOR SCHOOL

---

Featured in his local paper -

Wichita Daily Times May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1939

*'The model was constructed by Robert L. Parsons, 1902 Speedway, Hardin Junior college student on plans drawn by Herbert Voelcker*

,  
.....

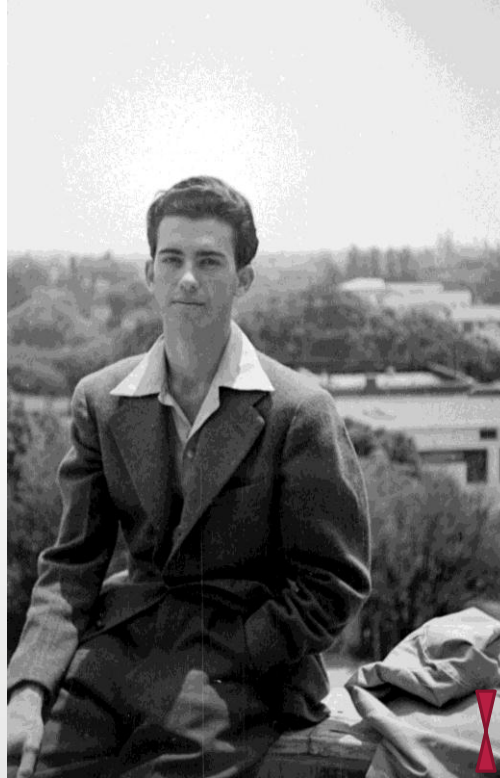




## UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

---

Moving to Los Angeles in 1940 to study fine arts, Bob, in his spare time would explore the grand houses and the quirkier homes of Beverley Hills. The house in the picture is Spadene House also known as Witch's House, the house was designed by art director Harry Oliver and originally built in 1921 to serve as offices and dressing rooms for Irvin Willat's studio in Culver City, it was moved to its present location in 1926. Also shown is Claudette Colbert home on Roxbury Drive.



Bob on campus  
1940

15

# UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Painting a portrait of fellow  
student Sylvia Nash



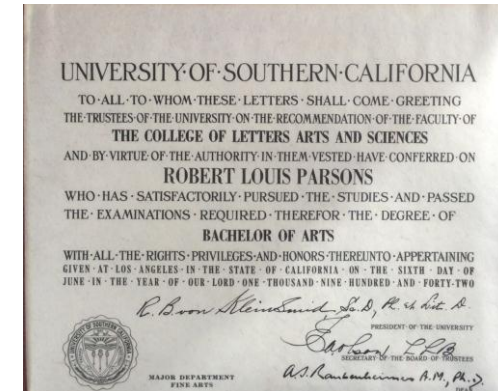


# UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

ROBERT PARSONS B.A.

---

Bob studied Fine Arts at the University of Southern California and in June 1942 received his degree. His education was interrupted by the war. After the war Bob attends Harvard University Massachusetts.





# THE ARMY

---

Bob was called up in December 1942, he attended an eight week training course at the US Army Air Force Technical School where he achieved a rating of 93.2. He achieved the rank of corporal and was posted to Headquarters & Headquarters 65<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing and was involved in campaigns in Europe, Normandy, Rhineland, and Ardennes. In 1943 he was posted to Saffron Walden, where his love of England was to begin.



18

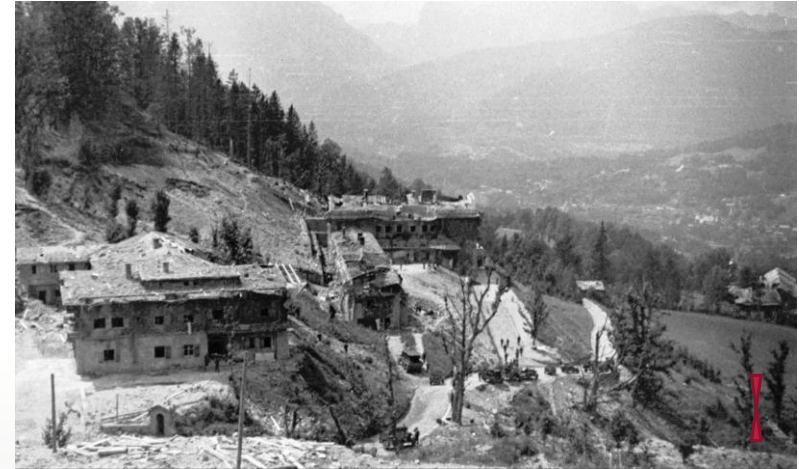
## THE ARMY

---

Bob photographing his  
convoy.

The bombed out Berghof  
at Obersalzberg, Bavaria.

Bob liberated four door  
hinges from the Berghof as  
he was passing through!





# THE ARMY

---

Mangfall Bridge Upper Bavaria Germany, opened in 1936, one of the first large bridges in the Reichsautoban system, it was destroyed by the retreating German army in 1945. The influential design of the bridge would have appealed to Bob's interest in architecture.





## 20 THE ARMY

---

Bob with his army unit at Versailles in 1944, with the end of the war in Europe he was given an honorable discharge in November 1945.

Decorations and Citations -  
Good Conduct Medal, European  
African and Middle Eastern  
Theater Campaign Ribbon  
Victory medal.



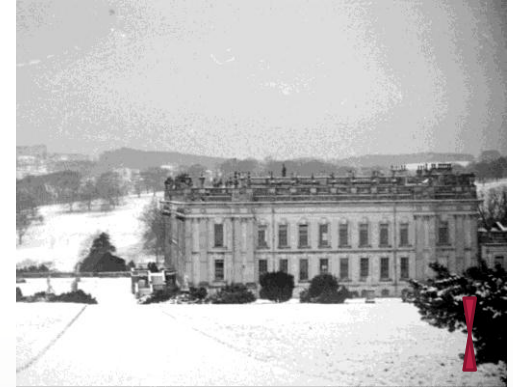
## 21 THE ARMY - THE FURLOUGHS

---

While stationed at Saffron Walden Bob went on many furloughs (leave of absence from the army), he would travel by train & bicycle around England exploring the countryside and architecture. I inherited a box of just over 2000 35mm negatives all photographs that Bob had taken from 1940 to 1960. He travelled to Scotland, Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Derbyshire, Norfolk, Kent and the Cotswolds. Bob would write a narrative with photographs of his furloughs which he regularly sent to his parents in America.



Mrs Lloyd - Great Dixter 1945





# MISS MIDGLEY

---



While stationed in Saffron Walden Bob met Miss Midgley (Bessie), a Quaker who held open house for American servicemen at Larchmount, her home in Saffron Walden. Miss Midgley and Bob became great friends, Miss Midgley had a large elaborate overgrown Victorian garden which Bob rescued from the gentle neglect of the war years. Miss Midgley looked upon Bob as a son and when she died in 1960, she left her estate to Bob.

Newark was the beneficiary of many of the garden ornaments from Larchmount and china decorated by Miss Midgley's father, Arthur, are in the collection at Newark Park.

## STUDENT OF ARCHITECTURE HARVARD UNIVERSITY

ROBERT PARSONS B.A., M. ARCH

---

Majoring in Architecture, Bob needed two more years to acquire a degree in architecture, after the war he attended Harvard University where he received his Master Of Architecture degree.

One of Bob's tutors at Harvard was the celebrated architect Ieoh Ming (IM) Pei who taught at Harvard's Graduate School of Design from 1946 - 1947.

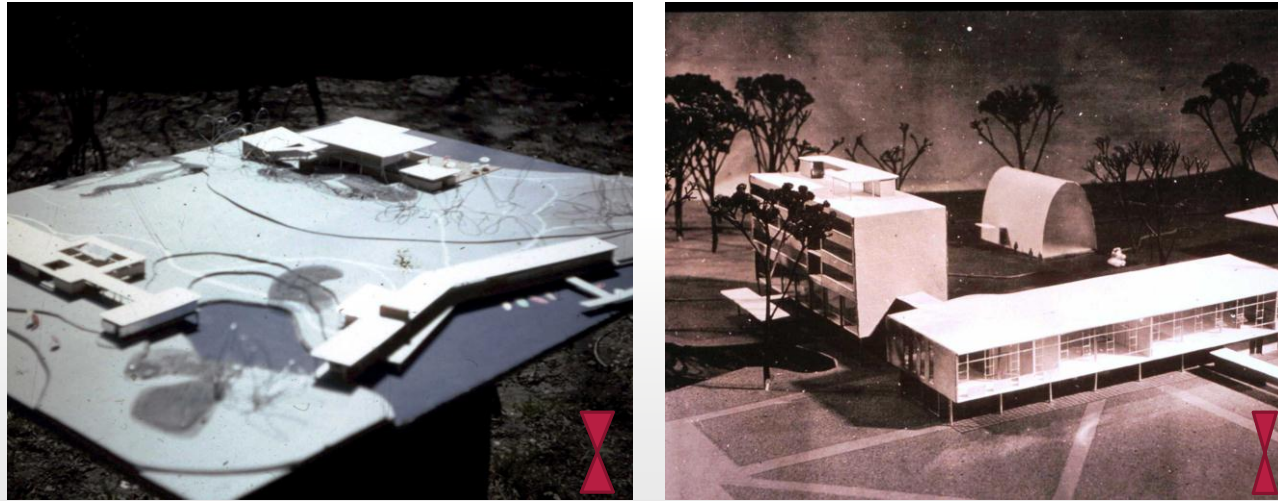
Bob is pictured standing in front of Robinson Hall, the home of Harvard Graduate School of Design.



Harvard University



24



# STUDENT OF ARCHITECTURE

---

BOB'S DEGREE COURSE THESIS WAS A NEW COLLEGE FOR CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY ENGLAND.

# BOSTON

---

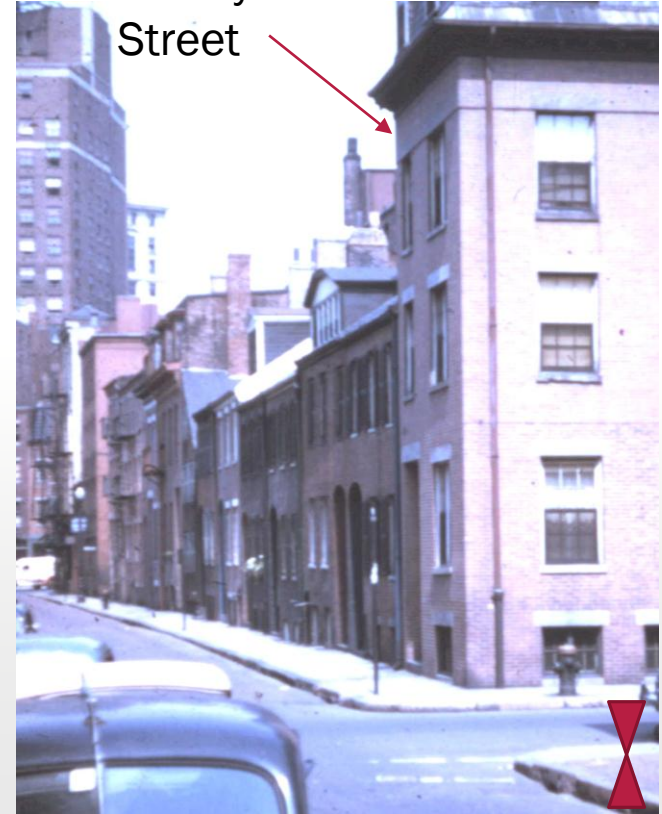
While at Harvard Bob resided at 34 Fayette Street.

25

Entrance to Bob's apartment



34 Fayette Street





# PARENTS

---

Bob's mother died in March 1946 aged 52 and his father died in April 1954 aged 66.



# AMERICA & ENGLAND

---

After university Bob travels by ocean liner between America and England, he starts a design and antiques business and opens a shop in America.

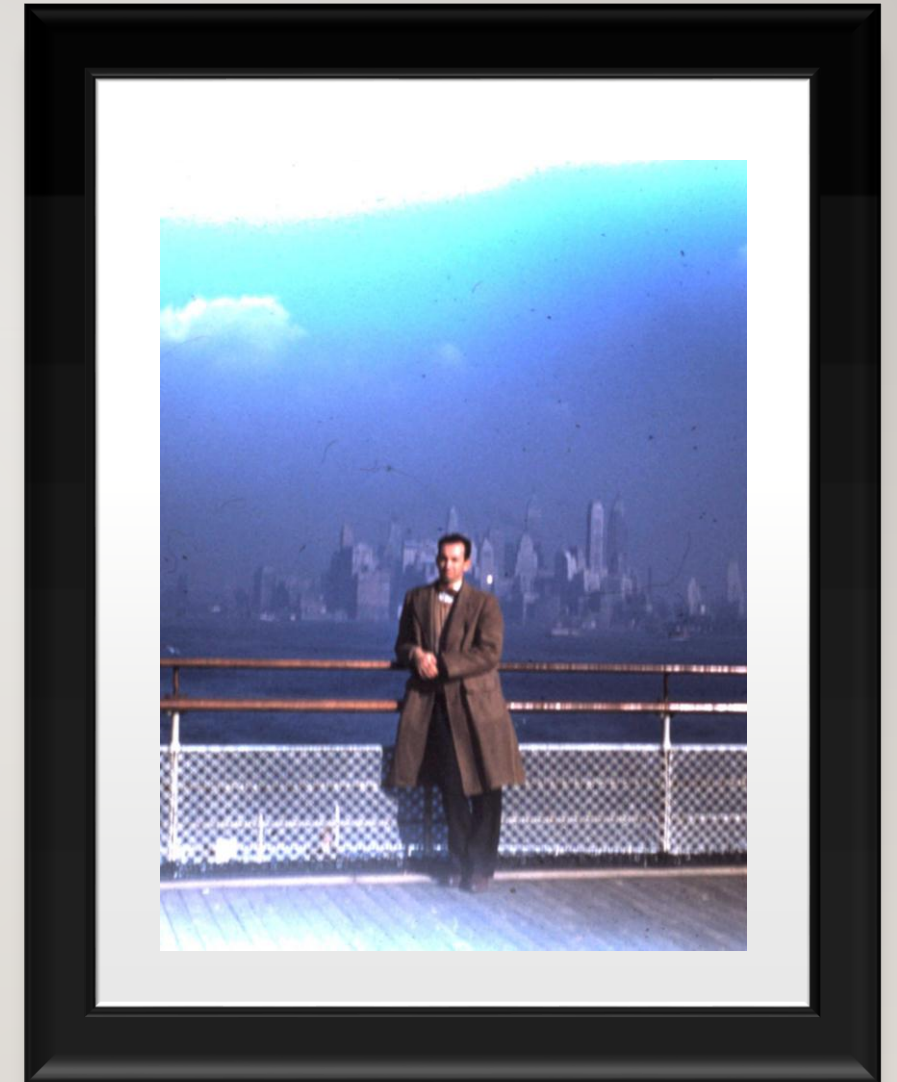
Arrived 22 June 1948 Ex New York at Southampton on the Queen Elizabeth b c1921 aged 27  
Address Larchmont Saffron Walden Essex Occupation Student.

Arrived 29 December 1950 Ex New York & Cherbourg at Southampton on the Queen Elizabeth b c1920  
aged 30 Address 48 Primrose Gardens London NW3 Occupation Designer.

Arrived 5 July 1951 Ex New York & Cherbourg at Southampton on the Queen Mary b c1921 aged 30  
Address 48 Primrose Gardens London NW3 Occupation Designer.

Arrived 4 March 1952 Ex New York & Cherbourg at Southampton on the Queen Mary b c1921 aged 31  
Address American Express London Occupation Antique dealer.

Arrived 2 december 1954 Ex New York at Southampton on the Queen Elizabeth b c1920 aged 34  
Address 2 Chalcot Gardens London NW3 Occupation Antique dealer

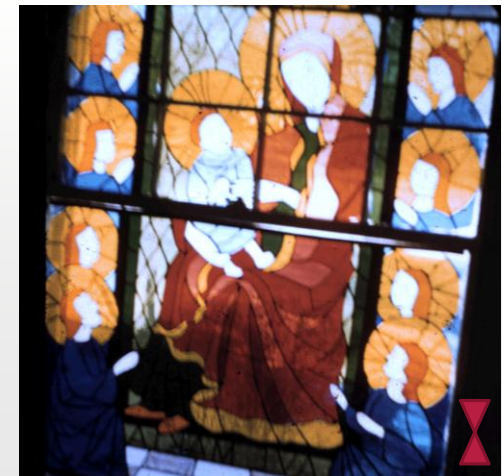
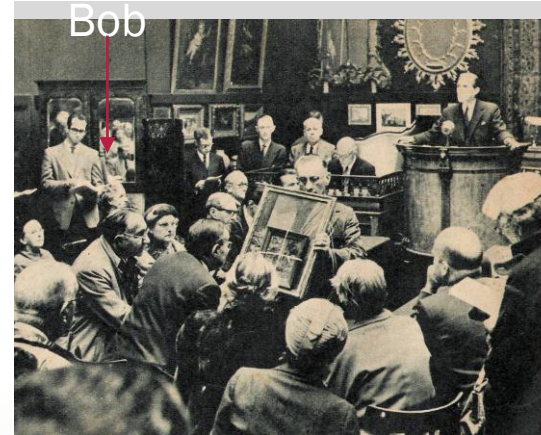




# AMERICA & ENGLAND

---

Bob attended auction houses to purchase stock for his shop. In the top picture Bob is attending a picture sale at Christie's London, the picture was published in the Times magazine in December 1956. The lower picture shows a cellophane, faux stained-glass window which Bob designed and made for his shop.

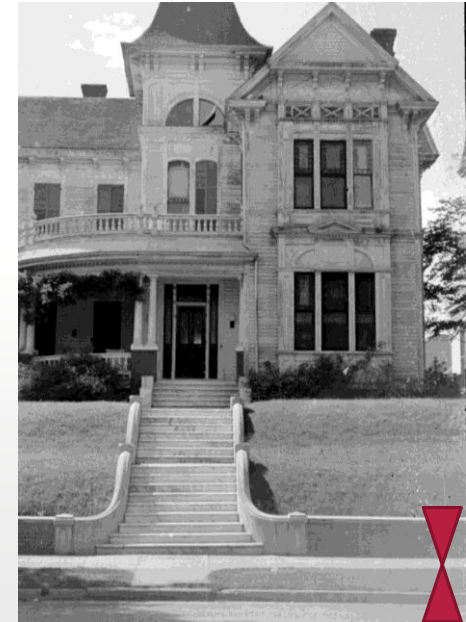


# AMERICA & ENGLAND

---

This sketch by Bob was drawn during a visit to Shreveport Louisiana.

The Doll House, Fannin Street, was built 1887 and demolished in 1971, Fannin street is now the central business district of Shreveport.





# MAN OF PROPERTY

---

Bob starts buying property in England and Italy, some to live in and others to renovate and sell or convert to rental properties.

- Parsons Cottage, Hawkedon, Suffolk (home)



# MAN OF PROPERTY

---

- Rose Cottage, Bedford, renovated and sold.





# MAN OF PROPERTY

---

- Waterside Cottage, Upper Upnor, Rochester, renovated and sold.



# MAN OF PROPERTY

---

- LONDON

Early in the 1950's, Bob bought houses in Hampstead, no 66 Parliament Hill, which he converted to apartments and no 2 Chalcot Gardens which he lived in for a time but later sold to American actress Carroll Baker. Bob also owned a house on Primrose Hill, a house in Kentish Town and an apartment in St John's Wood.



66 Parliament Hill



2 Chalcot Gardens (1952)



# MAN OF PROPERTY

## TUSCANY, ITALY

---

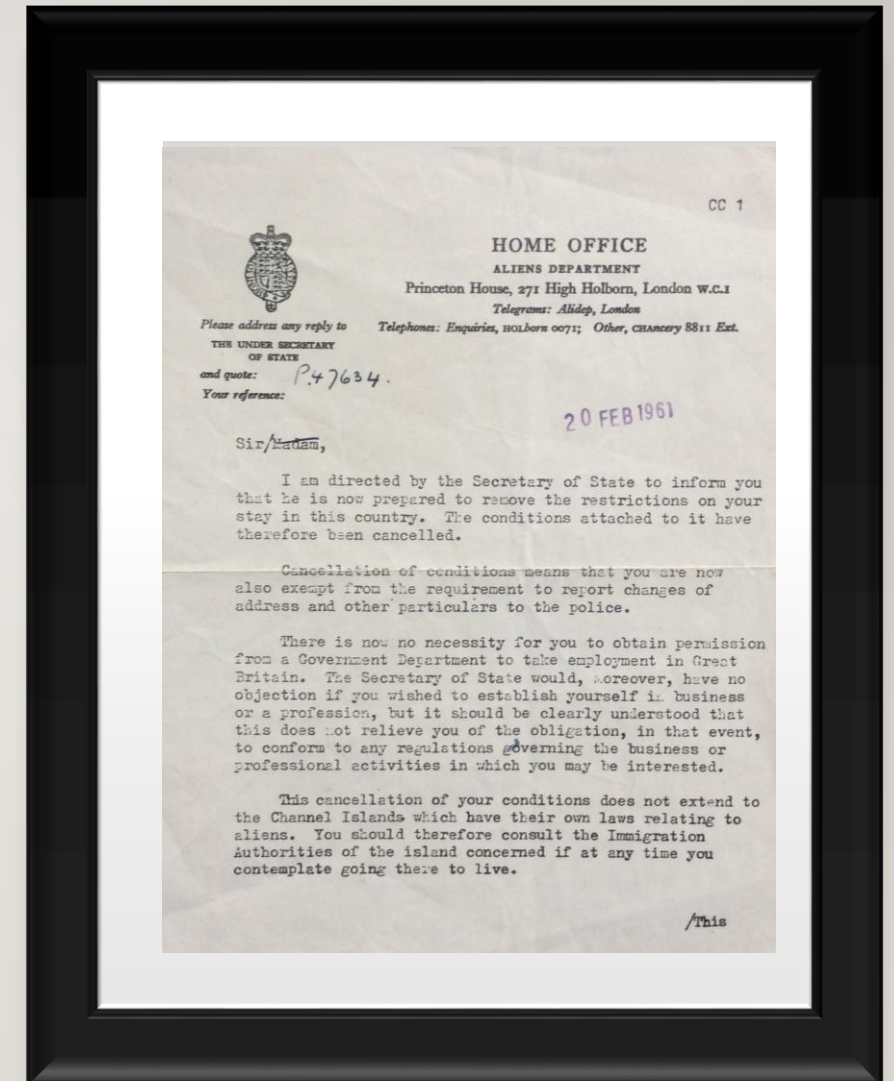
Bob bought a ruined tower in Pistoia which he sold early in 1990, he never restored the ruin, Newark was his priority. Bob had an apartment and two dilapidated properties in Rome, he abandoned the dilapidated houses due his commitments in England. Bob told me of a rundown property in Amalfi which slid into the sea! This happened either after he had become owner or just before he paid up!



# FREEDOM TO STAY AND LIVE IN ENGLAND

---

In February 1961 the Home Office inform Bob that restrictions on his stay in England had been removed.





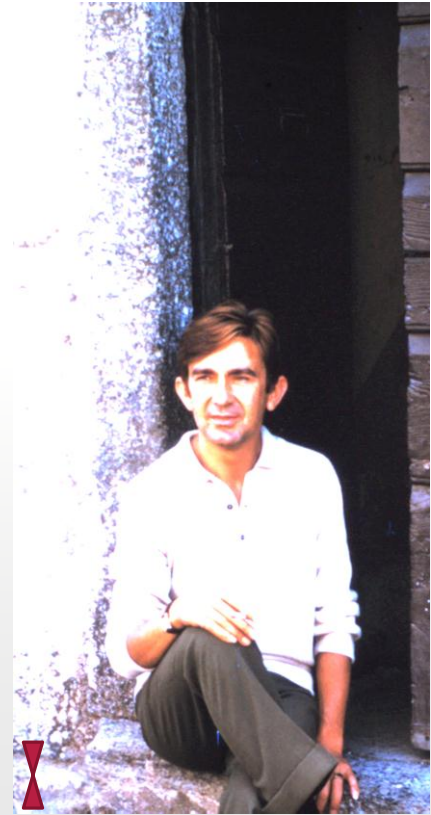
## EARLY FRIENDSHIPS

---

Harold - After the war Harold travelled with Bob in Europe, Harold is mentioned in letters between Bob and his father, the letters were full of news of places Bob and Harold visited.

Howard - One of Bob's first close friends in England, they shared No 2 Chalcot Gardens.

Silvio - A friend in Rome, Silvio worked in the Italian film industry, Bob appeared as an extra in some of the films Silvio worked on.



# EARLY FRIENDSHIPS

---

Maxwell (Max) Kelly

A friend from the 1950's, Max became Professor of history at Macquarie University New South Wales.

Max is captured on the right in a painting I inherited from Bob.



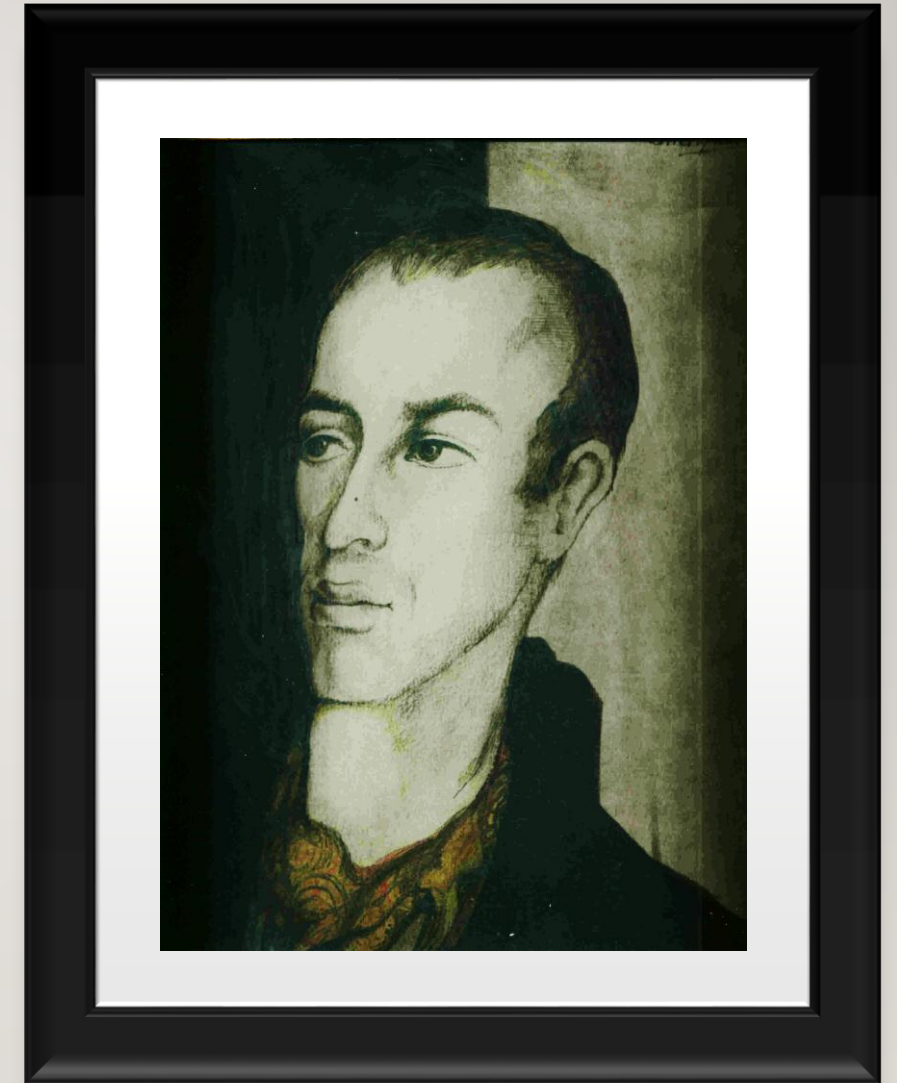


# EARLY FRIENDSHIPS

---

Leslie Hurry, Artist and Theatre Designer.

Leslie was a friend from the 1950's until his death in 1978, Leslie painted several portraits of Bob. Leslie gave Bob an introduction to the world of theatre, ballet and opera, at Newark in the 1980's I found a cupboard full of production programs from the late 50's to early 1970. Bob attended less productions when he moved to Gloucestershire.





## EARLY FRIENDSHIPS

---

Bob had many female friends, two who feature early in Bob's life in England, were Margaret Mitchel and Diana Curzon, Margaret seen in the photograph at Upper Upnor and Diana at Newark Park, both happy to help Bob with his projects.



# EARLY FRIENDSHIPS

---

In the 1950's Bob also became acquainted with the writer Nancy (Nan) Fairbrother, this photograph of Nan was taken by Bob at King William's Temple, The Royal Botanical Gardens Kew.



# 41 A TALENTED MAN

---

When it came to converting and remodeling houses, Bob only employed help when specialist skills were needed. Bob planned and executed much of the work on the houses and gardens of his homes. Needle work was a passion, in his limited leisure time, Bob would work elaborate patterns designed by Leslie Hurry.

All of Bob's talents would be exercised at Newark.

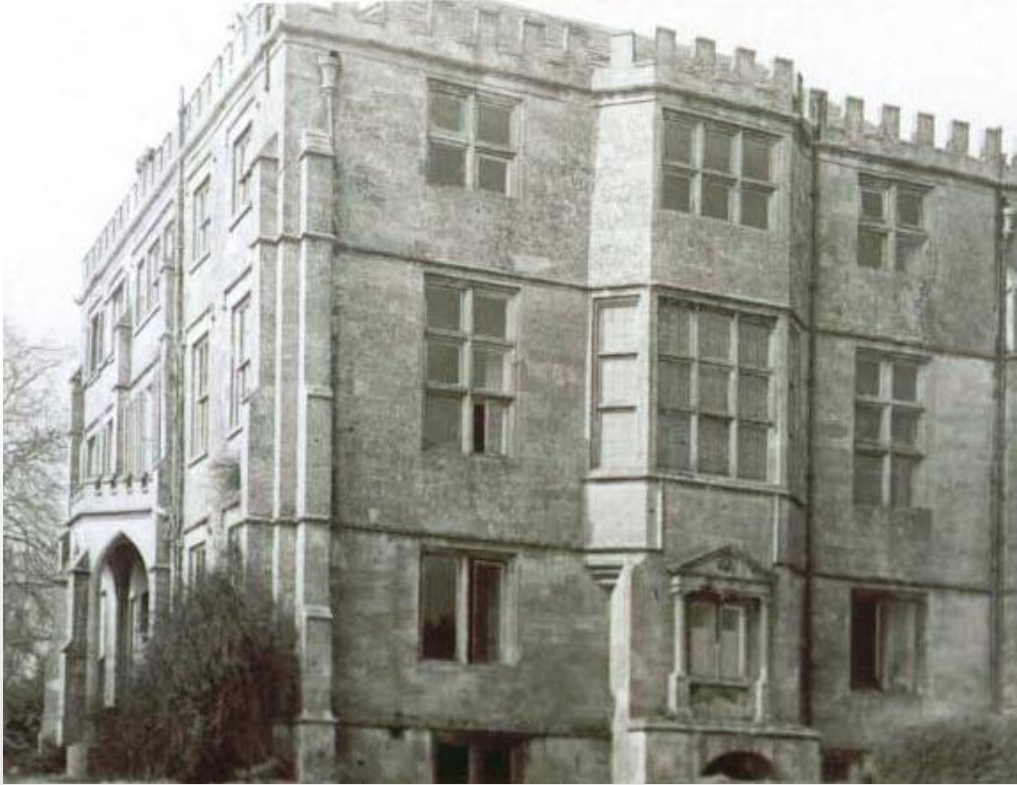


Linocuts and needlework



# NEWARK

---



“ I felt sorry for the place”, Bob’s response when asked, why he took on the house and garden.

Late in 1969, Bob was told by a friend about a neglected house owned by the National Trust at Ozleworth in Gloucestershire and that the Trust was looking for a tenant. Bob was intrigued, he journeyed to Ozleworth and in 1971 signed a thirty-year repairing lease at a peppercorn rent with a limited liability on expenditure of £500 per year. Bob was soon spending more than his liability as the house and garden needed so much work.

# NEWARK

---

*“The general effect induced is one of Wagnerian desolation and unrelieved gloom ..... I do not think it very much matters what use it [Newark] is put to”.*

These were the words of James Lees-Milne, secretary to the National Trust in a report he wrote about the condition of the property in 1949. By the time Bob arrived, two decades later the property had declined further. James Lees-Milne became a friend of Bob's, his opinion of Newark changed with Bob's transformation of the house and garden.



Bob with Daphne Fielding and James Lees-Milne





# NEWARK

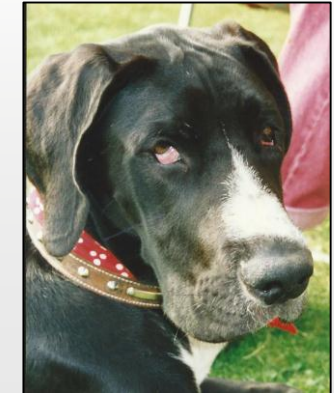
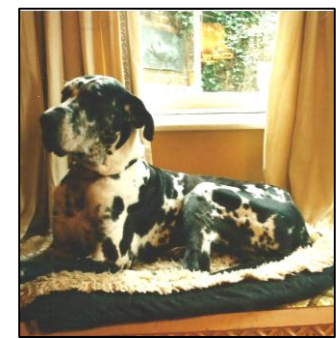
---

From 1970 for thirty years Bob would breath new life into the house, garden and grounds and make Newark a comfortable home, along the way he became a friend to many, and Newark became a place of abundant hospitality.

# GREAT DANES AND MORE!

---

With a big house came space for big dogs, over the years Great Danes, peafowl, ducks, geese, chickens and Purdy the parrot all featured at Newark.





# NEWARK

---

In the early days at Newark, Bob facilitated 'work parties' to help with the immense task of clearing the overgrown grounds. A National Trust scheme known as Acorn Camps provided work parties, they would 'camp out' in the house, be fed by Bob and in return help with recovering the overgrown garden and grounds.

In this Acorn group photograph, on the far left, is Digby Harris, who inspired by Bob would go on to become a much-respected architect.





## 47 NEWARK

---

Many other groups helped at Newark, ANTS – a National Trust volunteer group based in Cheltenham, the ANTS are still involved in the countryside at Newark. Dursley & District Birdwatchers, and the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme, have also been involved.

Many individuals who became friends helped Bob at Newark, prominent was Tulio who's many skills were employed in every corner of the house and garden.





# GLOUCESTERSHIRE LIFE

---

At an early stage Bob opened both house and garden to many local groups and charities. As Bob revealed the interesting architectural history of the house, Newark became popular with history groups and students of architecture. Bob was a trustee of the Mutual Householders Association which took him regularly to visit the country houses in the care of that organization. Bob was a member of the Georgian Group and of The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings.



Bob 'holding court' at the folly

# TRAVELLING

---

Travelling continued to be a part of Bob's life, with many trips to Italy, Thailand, Burma, Tunisia and America. Bob also continued to enjoy excursions around England exploring interesting churches and buildings of architectural interest.



On a plane to Thailand, visiting the Royal Palace Bangkok and dining beside the Grand Canal Venice



50

# 70<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY

---

In August 1990 Bob celebrated his seventieth birthday, for the occasion Rob Collins painted a portrait of Bob with Trudi.



# 1994

---

Bob's health was deteriorating and in 1994 Bob and I decided to leave Newark and live an easier life in London.

In May 1994 Bob surrendered the lease, we sold the contents of the house, keeping only what was needed in London and moved to Hampstead, it was an emotional but necessary move.



Bob planting a Lebanon cedar in May 1994 to commemorate his time at Newark.



# LONDON

---

The Royal Free Hospital, London, was just a short walk from our house, Bob was lucky to be in the care of that hospital, a brain tumor was diagnosed and operated on immediately. Bob made a wonderful recovery and enjoyed a new lease of life. Towards the end of 1996 Bob and I learnt that Newark was again available to rent, we approached the National Trust and agreed terms and returned to Newark.

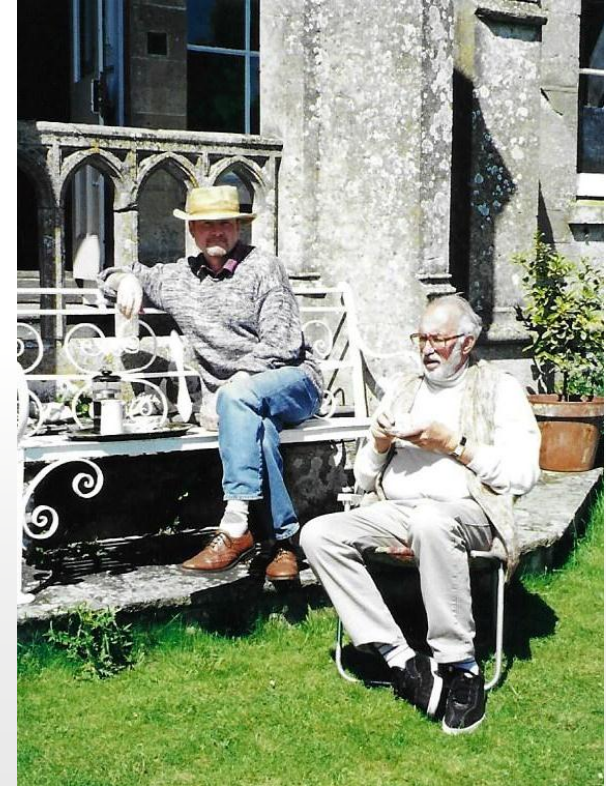


The garden at 66 Parliament Hill

# 1997

---

We moved back to Newark in May, refurnished the house and resumed our Gloucestershire life, Bob was back at the place he loved and was able to enjoy three happy years at Newark before passing away on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2000. I continued to live at Newark for a further ten years.



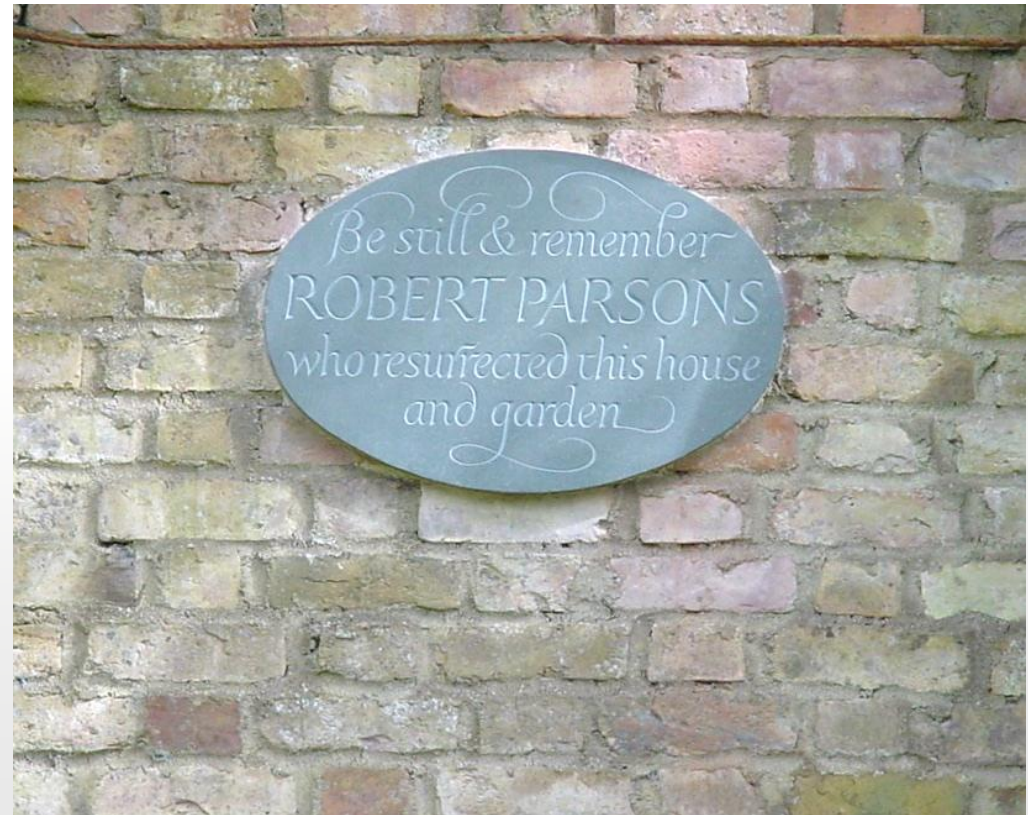
May 1997 Newark



From letters, April 2000

“absolutely charming, knowledgeable and gentle man” “held with great affection and respect”  
“most thoughtful and caring man” “what a special place Bob made Newark”  
“Bob’s warmth, kindness and generosity” “so kind and gentle that it gave him a graceful and noble presence” “so many years of being part of the social fabric of the valley”  
“his enormous warmth and generosity and huge knowledge” “he was always fascinating to listen to”  
“this rich and full creative life enriched the lives of everyone who knew him”  
“an exceptional man” “his life touched so very many others” “always so generous and selfless”  
“a very remarkable, original and sympathetic person” Bob was part of the scenography of our Gloucestershire life” “we will always be warm with memories of him” “he was a benevolent spirit”  
“indeed he made a great difference to my life” “a kind and generous man” “never forget his generous hospitality and subtle gift for making a party go” “such a kind and generous friend”  
“he was such a rare and creative man” “he was such an extraordinary person, he gave such a lot to those who were lucky enough to enter his circle” “such a genial and relaxed host”  
“such a tremendous life force”  
“however the cold winds might blow over the heights of Newark, his Texan warmth made all his visitors glow with his welcoming charm”





Memorial at Newark Park