

Paradise Rescued

From Cabbage Patch to Cabernet Franc



David Stannard

Contents

	Introduction	7
1	A Reluctant Francophile	11
2	The Dutch Diversion	25
3	Crossing a Foggy Bridge	35
4	The Housing Tsunami	45
5	Pay Up or Shut Up!	57
6	Running a Project Back to Front	67
7	Reality Dawns	75
8	With a Good Bit of Help and Advice	85
9	A Snowy Start	95
10	From Cabbage Patch to Cabernet Franc	105
11	You Want it When Monsieur?	111
12	We're on Cloud9	119
13	Dreams Do Come True	127

Chapter 1

A Reluctant Francophile

I enjoyed school. Most others didn't but then it's always fashionable and popular to say that you hated it. Good positive news rarely sells well! When you leave school, everyone goes on to say that they hate their work and their job. That really doesn't leave too much time afterwards to actually enjoy something. What a waste of a life!

I went to school in northwest London at a place called Mill Hill. I recall my grandmother paid for me to go there and both my father and uncle had also been schooled there. I loved the freedom of being away from home after a fairly traditional upbringing, but as an only child the pressure and intense scrutiny to do absolutely everything wonderfully well was sometimes too overwhelming. School away from home worked well for me. Except for the French bit!

I grew up in a traditional British home in the 1960's where no language was ever spoken other than the Queen's English. My parents were survivors of the Second World War and maintained a healthy dose of mistrust of all foreigners - particularly those south of the English coastline on the other side of the channel. It wasn't until many years after we bought our land in France that my parents first set foot in the country. They didn't own a passport between them and had never left mainland Britain. Century's old wars and political turmoil - not to mention a 22 mile stretch of water have served to separate two peoples whose origins and histories have been entangled since Roman times. While I personally thought that France had been on the same side as the English, it must have been hard to get beyond what had undoubtedly been a ghastly period to have lived through. However, traditional parental hypocrisy - or their desire that I shouldn't maintain some unfounded bias in my future - was demonstrated to the maximum and my learning of French was not an optional extra. Whether I liked it or not, I was destined to be on a boat to France for the annual school exchange trip. Ironically I was better at Latin - why wasn't there a field trip to ancient Rome?

The real reason I didn't want to go was that it was my second year at secondary school and at the same time as the exchange trip there was likely to be an opportunity to play in the first XI hockey team for the first time at the Oxford hockey festival. Sport was my passion and hockey was by far and away the best sport that I played. My father had given me a stick at the age of 5 and I played non-stop for the next thirty years. So when I had a choice between going to France or playing hockey, it was not a difficult choice to make. But I didn't have a

choice and so off to Rouen in Normandy I went. Back then I could never have imagined how it would change my future life. The trip to Rouen went well, but was also very hard work.

Most of the days there were spent at school in a French class understanding very little but inadvertently learning a lot. Dinner with my host family was followed each evening by homework. A lot of weekend time was spent touring around Normandy looking at old Romanesque architectural style churches. It wasn't really my favourite pastime but it did leave me with a love of France and its culture. Whole roast chicken and frites was the staple, and very tasty, Sunday lunch special. The final few days of the visit were spent touring Normandy in a bus and learning about its geography, geology and industry. All of which had to be written up in – yes – French! Needless to say, my written French remains reasonably good today due in no small part to that immersion.

Upon my return to England I remember getting off the train at Victoria and walking across the platform to buy a drink. I asked politely as always for my drink and back came the reply, "Sorry mate, what was that?" I asked again and this time the answer was, "Speak English mate, this is London, not Paris". My brain had already made the conversion and my mouth just started to speak as if I were in still France! This particular natural gift to speak to people in completely the wrong language is still alive and well today. I am the worst translator on the planet.

The French experiment refused to go away! Following the Rouen trip I sat my O level French exams in the Spring term. O (for Ordinary) level exams were typically taken at an age of 15 or 16 followed by A (Advanced)

levels in the final two years of school. A level results effectively determined which course and university you could attend. I passed the French O Level successfully; thinking and hoping it would be the end of my parent's experiment in new European thinking and I could quietly go back to the serious business of mathematics, science and my other O Level required subjects. Alas, that was not to be.

During the following year, I had to start studying part time for French A Level and at the same time continue to practice my written French skills by writing my modern European history O Level exams in French! These guys just didn't get it – or perhaps more accurately I didn't see the point at all! My still somewhat Europhobic parents were very impressed that their son was supposedly excelling in French as a means of compensating for their own complete disdain and fear of all things foreign in a country which still today can't decide if it really wants to be European or not.

The two year French A Level programme naturally composed a section of French literature. All read, learned and taught in French – of course! More interestingly too, it was taught to us by an Irishman, Rob Davey, who spoke French with an Irish accent that would rival my heavy Australian French accent today! While I studied I was thinking why on earth would anyone want to read a story about a Plague – *La Peste*, by Albert Camus? This made no sense whatsoever. As a story, it did not seem interesting and reading it in French just added to the sense of wasted time!

As the teaching and the book progressed, different things started to emerge. Sometimes a lack of choice in life can be beneficial – you don't have to debate the

whys and wherefores, just make it happen! I had to learn this completely the wrong way round! I went out and bought the English exam version copy which started to explain Camus' beliefs on existentialism. Although it was written about a town in North Africa being closed in by a plague it was an allegorical writing about Camus' views about French Resistance and collaboration in Nazi occupied France during the Second World War. I still couldn't believe that I was studying this high level intellectual work – reading like this was not interesting to me at all! However, as I progressed through the book, Davey started to blend in his own understandings and thinking around existentialism philosophy. This led to a deeper, more in-depth analysis of the characters in the book and an introductory analysis of what existentialist philosophy is all about.

Whilst I wasn't excited by the French component of the whole exercise, I started to develop some interest in the philosophy. It was fascinating to me that someone could come up with such a view of life and design characters to describe what Camus viewed as strong behaviour living their lives in such a way that they found meaning in what they did. It triggered a whole chain of thoughts in my mind about my own purpose. There seemed to be little point in just living, doing very little and just disappearing again.

While the French part of this exercise seemed merely academic, the life learning and the belief that there is a purpose for us all – or maybe at least for me – was to become one of my foundational values in life. I became a passionate believer in the view that we are not just here on this planet to exist and then disappear. We all have purpose and meaning – we just have to find it.

After Camus came Nobel Literature prize winner Jean-Paul Sartre and his political communist critique play *Crime Passionnel*, in which he espouses his existentialist philosophy to the maximum. It was a much shorter work to read but equally complex in its message to comprehend. My understanding of the structure of the story and reporting it back on paper was a lot easier. I found it easier to see the plan; maybe as it was the second work we had to study. Perhaps I had (partially) mastered the art of understanding French Literature.

The bottom line is that I passed French A Level with a D, which seemed liked a fair outcome given my relatively modest investment in time, interest and effort. One year later, when I only scored a C in Physics – supposedly a core engineering required subject – working round the clock to learn that mad science, I came to appreciate that perhaps my French result wasn't so embarrassing after all and next time I should try harder.

The Route to Chemical Engineering

It often fascinates me how fine the line is that defines careers and lives. Just minor changes or decisions at key moments can have an enormous impact. Deciding on a career or direction for work seems such a bizarre hit-and-miss process. And after all that decision making, education, research and job selection, most people still emerge with an unhappy look on their face!

My only reflection leading to sound advice is to find something you absolutely love, pursue it with maximum passion and enthusiasm and you will be rewarded handsomely! Although the difference (with respect to skill, experience and knowledge) between good and

excellent can be quite small, very often the rewards are a complete chasm apart.

You have to do what you love, and love what you do; otherwise a career quickly becomes a job, which becomes a chore. I still believe that everyone goes to work and lives life with the objective of doing well. But somewhere, they get thrown off the rollercoaster of interest and passion and then it all goes downhill to boredom, cynicism and disenchantment from there. We then blame everyone else, moan, groan and whinge forgetting completely whose life we are complaining about. If you don't like where you are at, make a change! Otherwise, there is ultimately only one person whose life you'll have let down!

Looking back, I can't say that my decision making process towards becoming a chemical engineer was a well researched, deeply thought out career choice because it wasn't! I liked and did well at science subjects. And when my strength in mathematics and chemistry was combined with a long time family friend who knew the oil and petrochemical industry well, this guided me to choosing Chemical Engineering. To this day I have no regrets. I certainly could have managed my career a little better, but overall, I have worked in very challenging environments where I have learned business excellence together with leadership and management skills and been well remunerated for it. It allowed me to travel the world and work with, for, and alongside many exceptional people; a good number of whom still remain my friends to this day.

Chemical engineering also saved me from doing more French and there would have been no other arts subjects that would have excited me in the slightest. And so it

was. I successfully completed my A Levels, stayed back one further term to make a failed attempt at getting into the University of Cambridge and after several months of learning about 'real work' in the world, I entered Birmingham University. My mother's ego never really got over the fact that I didn't achieve an entrance place into Cambridge and I was consistently reminded of my lack of success and her disappointment for at least the next thirty years. I rapidly came to learn that I had to live my life for myself and what I wanted to gain from it. Someone else's disappointment in what I did or did not achieve really did not matter. Internalising their lack of confidence in me was not an option! I was still the first ever member of our direct family line who went to, and graduated from university.

University was a brilliant period of life – all care and no real responsibility. During my teenage years, I was fortunate to have attended a school where I had the freedom to manage myself and my destiny proactively. I was encouraged to be a leader and was allowed enough freedom to get out on 'the edge' and make things happen. This allowed me to acquire some basic leadership skills, which were built upon later. At university, the boundaries of control are naturally much broader again and that gave me further opportunity to take up leadership opportunities, particularly in the sports management arena.

After a near death experience with a burst appendix during my finals exams, university quickly transitioned into working in the real world. I collected my degree on Saturday 12th July 1980 and started work two days later. No holiday – after all I had just had three years of minimal work in achieving my degree so why not start some real work! I joined Shell Chemicals UK working in

the North West of England and quickly came to learn that three years of unsponsored beer drinking at university had prepared me for only a start in life.

What's in the Genes Matters

My father was a printer, a second generation business owner in the city of London. The business had been founded by my paternal grandfather, who passed away before I was born. I am told that we would have had much in common and knowing a small amount about his life and business, I would have loved to have learned from him.

Prior to conscription into the British Army in 1914, Grandad had been a print sales manager for a small company in London. As an officer in the Middlesex battalion of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders Division of the British Army, he saw more than his fair share of horror and action, including participating in the first wave of the battle of the Somme where more than 100,000 casualties were sustained in just the first day. He was gassed twice and wounded three times but survived; and undoubtedly these casualties contributed to his early demise. How many bullets must have missed him? Without that thin line of luck, this story would have been someone else's. He returned to London, married my Gran and went back to work at his old job; but it had not been held open for him. Perhaps they underestimated his survival chances? They certainly did underestimate his entrepreneurial skills. Grandad promptly went out and started his own print business, F. Stannard Ltd. and several years later bought out his previous employer! I don't believe in revenge but I do love that story!

My father was the second of two sons. His elder brother Colin was conscripted into the Royal Navy in 1939

and served as an Operations Leading Seaman on HMS Neptune. He died along with 764 colleagues when the Neptune was sunk in the early hours of December 19th 1941. There was only one survivor in what was the second worst British naval disaster ever recorded. I am proud to have his Christian name as my middle name. Uncle Colin would have been the natural elder inheritor of my Grandfather's successful print business. But life did not work out that way.

My father finished his schooling at Mill Hill in July 1945 and went into national service as a Meteorological Seaman in the Fleet Air Arm, based all round the UK. He was discharged in 1948, married my mother in 1950 and straight away went to work for 'The Family Firm'. I don't know what Dad would have done, had the responsibility of taking over the family business not fallen on his shoulders. He had a lot of talent as an artist and salesman. But as someone who had spent the entire 1939-1945 war at school with only the prospect of becoming a serviceman to take on Japan, the priority while he was at school had not been placed on academic achievement. The war clearly changed a lot of things and the art and craft of fine letterpress print was being left behind in a different historical era.

F. Stannard Ltd was housed in a three storey building just off Little Britain, Cheapside in the City of London. Grandfather had spent many nights in Central London during the blitz putting out local fires and saving his own premises. The print machines, paper cutting and packaging lived on the ground floor. The offices and composition rooms where the print plates were built up letter by letter before proofing were all on the first floor accessed by a long steep staircase. And finally, the paper, stores and woodwork were all housed on the second floor.

It was a huge factory sitting on leased prime real estate. My Grandfather had indeed been very successful and in his era; this meant sharing it with his opportunistic brothers and family who all wanted a hand in the proceeds. His will and testament was full of loan write-offs and hand outs to his family. As the business passed down to my father, the luxury of such generosity and unproductive overheads could not be sustained. I recall the heated discussions between Gran and Dad over various members of the family and their apparent attitudes and assumptions about "what Grandad's business owed them". Needless to say, it was not a great recipe for creating a harmonious family unit. I have no recollection of meeting any great uncles although I know several existed.

Dad usually took me up to London during the school holidays for a day. It was always a fun adventure either travelling on the 8.03 train from Cobham to Waterloo and then on the so called 'drain' on the Bank Underground line direct to the City. Or latterly, Dad drove us up early into London and we had breakfast in town before going into the office. I was given the opportunity to meet everyone – it was a bit like being Simba in the Lion King, being paraded around the company.

Over time, as I grew up, I was put to work in different areas of the factory which I loved, and I got to know many of my father's loyal employees quite well. It also helped me to get an insight (but not fully understand) how and why employees struggle with the job concept and naturally abdicate themselves into a non-management role. I was also able to see how they took advantage of that relationship at every opportunity with increasing expectations on wage payment, better conditions while committing roort and minor theft. All

of which was a shame really, because my father treated people with respect and kindness, helping wherever he could. He did not act like a big authoritarian tyrant boss, neither was there any great reward for his efforts, given the financial and business risks he undertook and managed on a daily basis.

We lived in a nice but cold unmodernised house in Surrey, which my Grandfather had paid for. My Grandmother took care of my school fees out of what Grandad had left to her as legacy. The annual holiday was 10 days spent in south Devon because that was all the time my father could essentially afford to be away from the business. The family car was small by comparison to everyone else's and the company mini van had to be push-started most mornings! This was no life of luxury, by any means.

Over time, I have reflected a fair bit on where, why and what happened to that wonderful business. Was my Grandfather just a genius? Did he simply have a very clear vision of what he wanted to achieve or was he simply king of the niche business model in that era? I would love to ask him today about his key success elements – design, quality, service, price?

I never saw nor heard my father talk about what he wanted it all to be or look like in the future. There was seemingly no vision. Neither was there any inspiration for me to join the family firm. It just looked like a tough job for Dad and one that was unappreciated and unrewarding at every level.

As young boy at home, I remember the incessant arguments about business and money and why a private family business didn't seem to be working very well. It was neither a pleasant nor productive environment in which to do homework and score good

results. I didn't want to be there every evening in that kind of atmosphere. My father gave me a choice about where I wanted to go to school and what I wanted to do for a career. He could see the writing on the wall. If owning a business was all about endless arguments and seemingly mega-stress, I didn't want to be a part of it. I opted for the seemingly easy way out, to get a 'real job' as an engineer.

Despite making the significant decision to move the family business to East London, reducing overhead costs and working a lot harder, the glory days were gone and my father eventually sold the business. The F. Stannard Ltd. premises still exists in East London but the business does not. For him and my mother, on a personal level, it was an awesome decision and allowed them to semi retire to Sussex and really enjoy life. I was pleased for them.

Some time on into my career life, my father told me how proud he was of my achievements and what I was doing in business. That meant a lot to me. He never commented on whether he thought I made the right decision not to continue what his father had started, nor did he ever criticise me for it. Maybe he saw what an alternative career had brought me in terms of opportunities. Reflecting now, I doubt if I would have had enough experience or wisdom to have come from university and turn around a mid-sized printing company. My father had effectively been second in line to inherit and I never saw in him any real passion for fine art print. I doubt if I would have been able to be passionate about it either. Effectively, the lack of passion made my father's work into a job. That's not a great place from which to be leading any organisation or enterprise. Passion is a must-have quality.

Personal Development Life Message

*In the gap between stimulus and response
there is thought. We need to think before we act.*

Viktor Frankl, abridged.