

From empire's end to community foundation

Ashley Truluck's years have been filled with boy's own adventures, management challenges and service to the community. Rather than rest on his laurels, he has become chairman of the Wiltshire Community Foundation. Gary Lawrence found out why.

TO GET some idea of the myriad responsibilities and passions that fill Ashley Truluck's life you only need glance at a pigeon-holed bureau in his study that is packed with reports, minutes and agendas from a dozen different organisations.

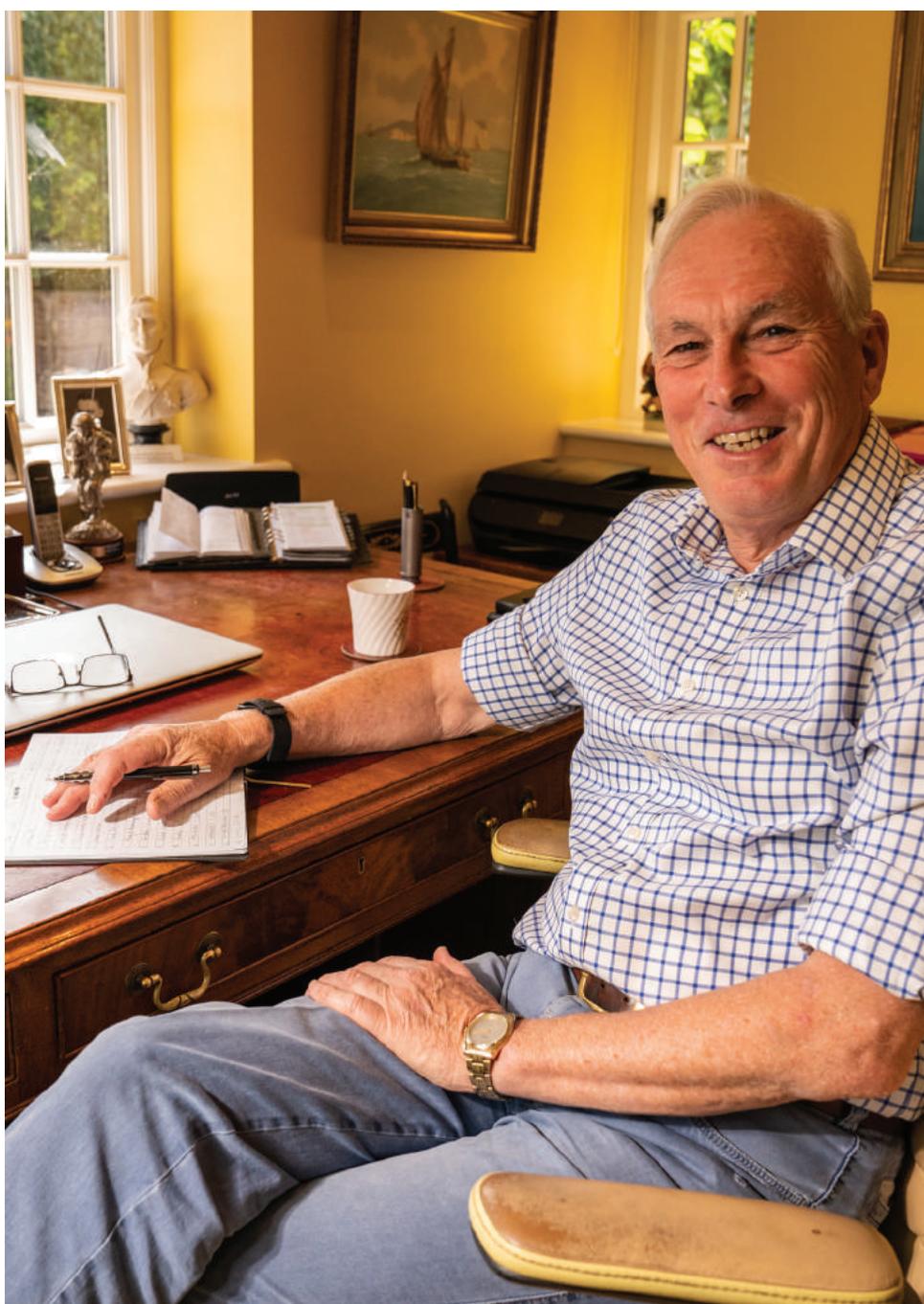
But if you think that demonstrates the extent of his commitments, think again. At one point in our conversation he slides a box out from under the sofa I'm sitting on and there, spilling out, are several more armfuls of files pertaining to yet more projects he is involved with. Not that there's a trace of disorganisation, everything is in perfect order as you'd expect of a retired general.

They say if you want something done, give it to a busy person. Well, here's a man who is living proof of that adage. After distinguished careers in the military and in public and commercial life, he has no intention of slowing down and has become chairman of trustees of the Wiltshire Community Foundation, the county-wide charity that last year distributed £1.2 million of support to communities and individuals in need.

He says: "I am passionate about community projects – so I wouldn't have taken on chairmanship of the Wiltshire Community Foundation unless I was convinced that it was a worthy cause led by well-motivated trustees and supported by a well-organised staff team.

"Everything I have seen indicates that to be the case. The foundation does a fantastic job – providing entrepreneurs and other donors with a safe and efficient route for dispensing financial support to communities in need. Equally importantly, it provides ongoing research into areas of need in Wiltshire, and free advice and guidance to people setting up and running community projects."

His appointment is just the latest addition to a CV that bristles with key responsibilities. It has been that way for all of a life that



Right: Ashley is passionate about community projects



PHOTOS BY TOM ASKEW-MILLER

began, growing up near Amesbury, with vague designs on an architectural career. But, feeling no pulse-quickenning thrill in putting up drab seventies estate homes, he followed his father into the Army and enrolled into officer training at Sandhurst.

“I could see that the Army offered travel and adventure and that was what I was after,” he recalls.

If he hoped that a military career would prove to be a passport to excitement, he was proved right. His first posting in the 1970s was commanding a troop of 30 Gurkhas in Malaysia, manning hilltop signalling posts and going out on jungle patrols. “It was a Somerset Maughan existence, the tail end of Empire – although I didn’t realise that at the time,” he recalls. “Many of the people we were working with were Far East stalwarts who knew the country well and respected local communities and customs – and I learned a lot from them.”

No life could have been more Kiplingesque for a young man with a sense of boy’s own adventure. He went on to serve with Gurkhas in Singapore, Hong Kong, Brunei, India and Nepal and his time in the Far East, like much of his life in and out of uniform, is captured in a collection of beautifully illustrated journals that preserve his memories of people, landscapes, wildlife, and architecture from 50 years of travelling the world. The sketches in the earlier journals are so evocative of the dying days of Empire, they look like illustrations for Ryder Haggard novels.

Who could have wanted more spice in their life? Well, Ashley actually. It was while he was with the Gurkhas, and by now acting as aide-de-camp to the Major General Brigade of Gurkhas and commander of Far East land forces, that he talked his superiors into letting him take a year off to compete in the first Round the World Yacht Race, using a yacht borrowed from Chay Blyth.

‘The Army offered travel which is what I was after’

During the course of the race his crew had to cope with the yacht capsizing off the south coast of New Zealand; scaring off a whale that threatened to overturn the yacht; threading a route through icebergs in the Southern Ocean, and struggling for survival in storm-force winds and mountainous seas off Cape Horn. Lives were lost on other yachts in the race, but his crew suffered only one man overboard in icy seas (who was quickly recovered) and one case of a broken rib.

Amazingly, the experience did nothing to drop an anchor on his life-long love for sailing.

It was while he was preparing for the Round the World Race that Ashley was given a ‘quiet’ posting in Yorkshire. He reported for

duty and was told he was expected to attend the Officers’ Mess St Valentine’s Ball the following evening – with a partner.

Unphased by being new in town and knowing no one, he rang the local hospital, got through to the matron and asked innocently whether she had any young ladies available. “Young man, I am not a procurress,” came the reply.

Somehow, he charmed her into an introduction to two nurses who happened to be daughters of an Army officer. One of them was Jenny, who became his wife four years later. The couple now have a daughter, Cherry, who is married and runs a community project in Folkestone, and a son, Laurie, who is a classical musician working in London. Cherry had their first grandson four years ago, and Laurie was married this summer.

Ashley’s army career continued its upward trajectory with postings to Germany where he served with Royal Signals in the Guards Armoured Brigade, then commanded an independent airmobile squadron and finally found himself a lieutenant colonel in charge of a regiment of seven squadrons.

At this time the Cold War was in full swing and tensions on either side of the Iron Curtain were running high, with East and West playing a game of nuclear brinkmanship. It was a high stakes affair in

Above: Ashley’s career has taken him around the world working on projects that all involved aspects of community work



which neither side could afford to blink. Ashley was in no doubt about the part he and his regiment were to play as part of the British Corps' covering force.

He recalls: "The covering force were the tripwire, the sacrificial lamb. Our job was to hold the line whilst the rest of the British Corps deployed and organised for a nuclear response." Not an easy concept to explain to his new bride.

After Germany, Ashley moved back to the UK and for the next decade served on the General Staff with increasing amounts of responsibility. At Army Headquarters in Wilton he was the Brigadier General Staff, responsible for army organisation and deployments, masterminding the closure of Far East bases and the merger of United Kingdom Land Forces and the British Army of the Rhine.

After a stint in charge of the Apache Attack Helicopter programme in the UK and USA, he moved to Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe in Belgium and the challenge of re-structuring NATO's command and control for its new international peacekeeping role. He found himself juggling the competing egos and agendas of his international partners, while new command arrangements were tested for real in Balkan conflicts. He says: "My job was to take all these different nations and their military staffs and mould them into an effective international command structure. It was fascinating work – a community project writ large."

In 2000 he decided to leave the Army, but if anyone was expecting him to take command of a lawn mower in early retirement, they were sadly mistaken. "I wanted to start a second career with new challenges, and to do that I reckoned I needed to leave by the age of 52 before getting too set in my ways," he says.

Although he left at a higher rank than his father, his fierce pride in him is unmistakable. "My father was a kind man, a wise mentor

and huge influence in my life," he says. "He ended up a major, I ended up a major general – but his was the greater achievement. I started from Sandhurst as a second lieutenant, halfway up the pyramid, he began as a boy trumpeter in the Royal Horse Artillery and worked his way up from there – including service in India, Eritrea and North Africa."

'I have been blessed with true luck in life'

Ashley and Jenny settled down in their thatched farmhouse in Broad Chalke. But before there was any chance he might opt for a quiet life in the countryside, he was asked to manage the formation of the new London Courts Authority, which meant merging 40 magistrates courts and 5,000 judicial and administration staff. Three years later he was helping set up a foundation providing security advice and support for charities working in danger spots across the world.

A year or so later he was in the Department for Communities and Local Government leading the introduction of the first nationwide communication network for the emergency services in England, Scotland and Wales. He recalls: "There was a certain amount of resistance to start with, but people quickly saw the operational advantages of police, fire and ambulance services all working together with common communications and information systems across county boundaries – which was very satisfying."

He went on to act as a strategic advisor to IBM, before combining his interests in history and travel by acting as managing consultant (and erstwhile guide) for a

cultural and historical tour company, a role he still enjoys. His other interests include hillwalking, cycling and country pursuits – all outdoor activities. But as is by now obvious, that is no indicator of slowing down.

In recent years, in addition to his paid work, he has acted as colonel commandant of his regiment, as the local regional chairman of the Gurkha Welfare Trust, admiral of an offshore sailing association, chairman of the Society for Army Historical Research, and chair or director of several national charities and benevolent trusts. It is little wonder that bureau in his study is so overflowing.

An example of his inability to sit back and allow events to take their course came a few years ago when he formed a neighbourhood planning group in the Chalke Valley. It created a community hub in the United Reformed Church to house the village post office, coffee shop, meeting rooms, information centre, and place of worship, thus saving them all from closure.

He is a man who looks forward rather than back and consequently eschews his former military rank. He says: "It was so refreshing when I left the army to learn that my first name was Ashley and not general or sir." But he acknowledges that army life gave him his abiding interest in people and what makes them tick.

He says: "With a surname like Truluck, I have been blessed with true luck in life. I hope I can bring just a little of that luck to my time with the Wiltshire Community Foundation in order to 'put people who care, in touch with communities that matter' – and so help make Wiltshire an even happier, safer and more equitable place to live and work in." WL

Above: Ashley has preserved his life's adventures, the people he has met and the places he has been through sketches collected in a series of journals spanning 50 years