

Readers' lives

Remembering loved ones | Paid-for tributes

Brake brother who changed the UK's food landscape

Frank Brake, 85

Frank Brake's parents were among the few publicans before the war to offer customers a bite to eat with their beer — sandwiches or cheese on toast. Growing up at the Crown Inn on New Oxford Street in Holborn, central London, gave Frank and his brothers, William and Peter, the seed of an idea that would grow into a business worth £1 billion and employing nearly 10,000 people.

Brake Bros's innovation to supply frozen foods to the pub trade would help to establish it as one of the leading food distributors in the UK. "I think we were very instrumental in making the pub food business what it is today," said Frank.

He had started his career working in hotels, but was deeply upset at how poorly staff were treated. Living by the dictum "even the worst experience is valuable", Frank stored these lessons in how not to run a business.

When his elder brother, William, started selling poultry to restaurants and hotels, Frank jumped at the chance to help during a busy Christmas period, plucking turkeys at his brother's pub in Swindon, Wiltshire, and delivering them to London at all hours. In between runs, he would lie down on the kitchen floor for 20 minutes.

Frank never returned to the hotel trade. A third brother, Peter, joined the business and the Brake Bros Food and Distribution Company was established in 1958 in Lenham Heath, Kent. A fourth brother, Paul, joined the company in 1968. After divesting

the poultry business in 1972, the brothers focused on supplying frozen meals in temperature-controlled vans. Some observers thought frozen chips would never take off when all a pub landlord need do was peel a potato, chop it and fry it, but they proved to be a bestseller. The company even printed menus for its pub clients. It expanded into schools and hospitals.

A flotation in 1986 funded a big expansion and diversification. When Frank, William and Peter arrived at the London Stock Exchange, the road outside was nearly blocked with people queueing; a policeman told the brothers to move on. The initial public offering was 29 times oversubscribed. The company acquired many food businesses over the next few years and sold frozen foods to French cafés and bistros.

Blessed with a prodigious memory, Frank had a talent for remembering



Frank Brake was greatly admired by his staff. He never forgot a name or face

names of even the most junior staff when he visited the company's distribution centres. He perfected the art of encouraging improvements without annoying staff and always asked for people's opinions. His family have been inundated with tributes from former Brake Bros employees. Many former staff are among the hundreds planning to attend a celebration of his life.

Peter died unexpectedly in 1989 and, as William's health declined,

Frank was left in sole charge of the business. He retired in 2002. "I was doing the end of year report and I saw my name in print, 'Frank Brake, chairman, 68 years old.' I thought anyone reading that would think 'isn't it about time he retired.'" When he sold the company shortly afterwards it had a turnover of £1.5 billion and employed 9,250 people.

Francis Robert Brake was born in Holborn, London, in 1933. After the outbreak of war he was evacuated with William and Peter to schools in Worthing, Ealing and Banbury. They ended up at the Licensed Victuallers' School in Slough. Separated from their parents for most of the war, the three brothers became independent, self-reliant and forged a bond that would see them through decades in business together.

Frank went on to take a course in hotel and catering management at Borough Polytechnic (now London South Bank University) and in 1952 he started his National Service with the RAF. As a pilot his low flying was described as "over-adventurous" and he was reassigned to a depot in London, where he discovered a talent for logistics.

In 1959, he married Evelyn, a nurse from Guernsey. They had three

children: Michelle, Phillip and Richard. As profits grew, the family continued to live in the same modest home in Ashford, Kent, and Frank rarely bought new cars.

Frank's only extravagance was the house he kept in London. He had never tired of the city, attending dinners, concerts, galleries, talks and conferences. He was granted the freedom of the City of London, was a member of the Policy Exchange and was elected a fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts. He would walk everywhere.

He was often sought to pass on his wisdom to aspiring entrepreneurs. "Do the work of three people and pay yourself a third of the salary of one," Frank would advise.

Kind and humble, Frank had many interests to sustain his retirement and was buoyed by his boundless energy. In 40 years he did not miss a Monday evening meeting of the Rotary Club of Ashford. He also served as its president.

Frank played tennis into his eighties and loved golf. On holiday in Portugal, his family once bribed the club professional at a local course to tell Frank he had to play off the ladies' tee because he was too old to play with the men. He saw the funny side.

The only blight on his later years was the declining health of his beloved wife who has Parkinson's disease and dementia. Parkinson's UK and the Cure Parkinson's Trust were among the causes that the Frank Brake Charitable Trust supported.

Frank would never just write a cheque. He was once asked for a donation to mend a leaky roof at the only treatment centre in Kent for multiple sclerosis patients. After a meeting with Frank, no funds were on the table, but the roof repair had been replaced with a vision to build a high-tech centre. Frank helped with fundraising, watched the project flourish and matched the funding. The Kent MS Therapy Centre opened in 2015. By then, Frank's own health was failing, but he "soldiered on". Practical and meticulous to the last, he chaired a committee to plan his funeral down to the final detail.

A new service in paid-for tributes

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Frank, right, with Peter, left, and William, centre, before the flotation in 1986

HR manager who watched Luton Town with Eric Morecambe

Austen Hawkins, 99

On a sunny day in the spring of 1944 Major Austen Hawkins was summoned to Royal Marine headquarters to be told about his next command and instructed to select his number two. All he knew was that the targets were codenamed Gold, Juno and Sword. He briefed his friend in Simpson's-in-the-Strand, and over a beer persuaded him to join what was sure to be one of the easiest missions of the war: retaking Guernsey, Jersey and Sark. Only later did they discover they were being dispatched to the beaches of Normandy.

After the war, Austen settled in Kenya, where he worked in human resources for Shell.

He married his beloved wife, May, in Nairobi in 1950, where their sons, Mark and Andrew, were born. Later



Major Austen Hawkins in his Royal Marines uniform during the war

postings took the Hawkins family to Ghana, Oman, Turkey and Nigeria.

Forced to leave school at the age of 16 after the death of his father, Austen later said that not going to university was his only regret. As a result,

education and personal development became his passion. He made sacrifices to ensure his sons received the best possible education; while as a human resources manager he delighted in skilling up local people to work for Shell. He was an early champion of diversity in the workplace.

Austen Hawkins was born in Luton, Bedfordshire, in 1919, the son of a hatter. Disaster struck when the hat factory in Luton owned by his father and two uncles closed during the Depression. His father, Ralph (a sickly veteran of the First World War), was left unemployed and died not long afterwards. Needing to support his mother, brother and two sisters, Austen became a civil servant at 16.

Living to 99, he had what he described as "a very good innings", although he joked about surviving a few "dropped catches and run-outs"

along the way — June 6, 1944 (D-Day) was perhaps the most memorable. Later he was a passenger on an aircraft from Istanbul to Ankara that was hijacked in 1981 and diverted to Sofia in Bulgaria. He suffered a suspected heart attack on a flight to Los Angeles in 1994. The flight was diverted to Reykjavik, and he was pleased that his letter of apology to Richard Branson, the owner of Virgin Atlantic, was met with a personal response.

His chief recreation was Luton Town Football Club, where he was a season ticket holder for many years. His cousin was club chairman and Austen used to watch matches in the directors' box with Eric Morecambe, a fellow Luton fanatic.

He retired in 1985, choosing Bournemouth because he felt it would be a great place for friends, children and grandchildren to visit.

It was also a great base from which to continue his travels — annually to San Diego to visit one of his sons, and twice to Normandy to tell his family the story of the D-Day landings at Juno beach.

When in 2015 the French government announced the decision to award the Légion d'honneur to all surviving D-Day veterans, Austen's eldest grandson, Jack, secretly nominated him. The medal arrived just in time to make Christmas 2015 especially memorable.

The eulogy at his funeral given by Austen's elder son, Mark, praised Austen's personal responsibility, humility, frugality, commitment and work ethic, all traits of what has been called "the Greatest Generation".

Afterwards, his family enjoyed a curry made with Austen's "special" recipe. No doubt he would have wanted it to be a bit hotter.