

Campaigning Journalist

Goodbye Bennie Gray

On December 27, 1974 the *Evening Standard* published a story alleging that the 'tenants' of Mr Bennie Gray at the Antique Supermarket in Barrett Street W1 were 'angry' at 'rent increases' imposed during the freeze on business rents. Two weeks later, on January 13 the *Evening Standard* apologised to Gray for any embarrassment caused by the article. In fact the dealers are not tenants and they do not pay any rent.

In obtaining this apology Gray showed a commendable devotion to the facts, a devotion which helped him to win the award of Campaigning Journalist of the Year in 1974 along with Christopher Booker. Given this attention to detail it was strange that Gray did not write to the *New Statesman* last year when Anthony Howard wrote in his "Crucifer" column: "(Bennie Gray is) something of a mystery man, he confesses to having spent a period himself as a property developer from which he retired in 1963 to study music".

This is not quite the case. After leaving London University with an engineering degree, Gray went to Cambridge where he met amongst others John Clinton-Hewson with whom he was later to go into business. In Cambridge, Gray represented the large plant-hire firm of Ingersoll Rand and friends remember him as being particularly interested in Aldous Huxley. On one occasion he and a friend decided to take mescaline, but unfortunately the two were deceived into taking crushed aspirin instead.

Two years later, in 1960, Gray went into the property business in London. This was the period following the 1957 Rent Act which decontrolled rents and the times were propitious for a smart young man intent on achieving fame and fortune. Over the next five or six years, Gray formed over 20 property companies and at one stage he was letting over 300 bed-sitters in London and Cambridge. Betraying his education, Sven Bennie Gray (sic) named most of these companies after great Romans - e.g. Diocletian Investments, Caracatus Investments, Caligula Properties. In most of the companies, Gray was the sole director with his wife Shirley as secretary, though most of the Cambridge ones were co-owned with Clinton-Hewson.

The Rachman revelations brought property speculation of this sort a bad name and Gray decided to branch out into the equally lucrative field of antiques (Gray helped to expose Rachman to the *Sunday*

Times despite having worked with Rachman employees Alan Green and Peter Davies). By this time, he clearly felt that he needed a better image and took up piano lessons from his close friend Ruth Hall, wife of Ron. In May 1964, Gray formed the Antique Supermarket, owning 99 of the 100 shares. In 1972 the company showed a profit of £13,617 and Gray paid himself £10,000. Then in July 1966 he set up the Knightsbridge Antique Supermarket. Again he owned the lion's share of the company - 7,279 out of 8,000 shares. 80 shares were owned by film director, Francis Megahy and 80 by art director Asheton Gorton and 560 by none other than Ron Hall. Hall, who was later to become a tenant of Gray's, sold his shares in January 1972 because, he told friends, "I never get any dividends". The last declared profits were £24,286 on a turnover of £70,412 and Gray paid himself £10,500.

Thus, it would be stretching things to say that Gray has "retired". He remains a director of about 15 companies and continues to pay himself a salary from many of them. Moreover, on several occasions his firms have received letters from the Department of Trade and Industry threatening to strike the company off their records, unless they produced accounts (e.g. Coriolanus Investments). Then again, to the accounts of several companies notes have been appended by accountants Wilson, Davis & Co. stating "We have been unable to verify certain of the assets and liabilities and proper books have not been kept". This particularly applies to those companies owning property in Cambridge (e.g. Crassus Property Investments). Nearly all of the companies have not filed an annual return since 1972 which strictly speaking is illegal. Gray has retained nearly all of his shares and his directorships, having sold only one company - Antiquarius Ltd. in January 1974. In the 18 months previously he had paid himself £26,000.

Golf

A Fair Copt

Since Midland TV personality and assistant Chief Constable Maurice Buck announced yet another far-reaching corruption inquiry into Birmingham's housing department on July 15 last year little has been heard of the team of detectives led by Detective Superintendent Peter Mincher. However, *Eye* correspondents report that the number of people being questioned, particularly ex-Bryant employees, suggests a healthy industry on the part of Inspector Knacker.

One point which is no doubt becom-

ing apparent to the relentless Knacker team is the part played by golf in cementing many profitable business relationships. This was underlined by the *Birmingham Mail* of December 19 in which Mincher confirmed that an accountant had been added to the corruption squad and that enquiries were being made at luxury hotels in Ireland - possibly following information supplied by affable Jim Sharp and in accordance with details in *Eye* 327.

Whilst it is generally known that Bryant directors including Chris Bryant who plays at the Copt Heath club, golfed with city architects and public works officials, it is not widely realised that much other work was negotiated at the same venue, most notably by Maurice Barwick and Peter Samuels.

Bryant directors had a special friend at James Booth (aluminium) [a subsidiary of the Alcan Multinational] at Kitts Green. This was Roy Hall and after he and Bryants successfully built a large mill for Booths, much 'negotiated' work flowed in especially on the lucrative maintenance side, but also on another large contract at Skelmersdale. Hall, whose services have since been dispensed with was a frequent and eager visitor to the Bryant's entertainment centre at Sandbanks, Poole.

Like sacked City engineer Sid Piggott, Hall too had a house extension erected for him by Bryants at Barwick's discretion and with the knowledge of Chris Bryant, latterly a regional director of the National Westminster Bank. Similarly a golfing orientated works engineer at the Wolverhampton and Birchley rolling mills of James Booth was to hand out much profitable work to Bryant's Civil Engineering department in return for which he was gratefully supplied with a new set of golf clubs. It is not known whether this inspiration improved the game for either party or not. Cordial relations were also enjoyed with Delta Metals and Sperryn and Co, the well-known brass-founders.

Readers will recollect that it was Bryant policy to reserve at least two boxes at Ascot for the use of anyone they thought might prove helpful when viewed from a work provision point of view. This of course frequently included civic dignitaries and Public Works officials. Not only were visitors transported, well fed and watered at company expense, but gambling requirements were catered for and Bryant lackeys were on hand to place bets for the usually over-tired and emotional followers of the Sport of Kings.

Amongst others to enjoy this treatment were Lord George-Brown and Minister of Sport, Denis Howell. During one hot afternoon when Bryants had been particularly unsparing with their liquid generosity, Lord George became more than a little preoccupied with a posse of ladies in the adjoining box. He leapt to his feet and made a gallant effort to clamber over the fence separating the boxes. Racegoers were treated to a lively scene, because Howell ran after him and pulled him to the ground.

Sunday Times quote of the year, December 29, 1974:

"Most British statesmen have either drunk too much or womanised too much. I never fell into the second category".

- Lord George-Brown