

*A Tribute to*  
*David Rawdon*



## HOTELIER EXTRAORDINAIRE

### - DAVID RAWDON –

*IT'S 1pm in the tiny Victorian hamlet of Matjiesfontein, and as clockwork, 85 year-old David Rawdon emerges to take the helm of his much-loved Lord Milner Hotel. Sitting below a portrait of the village's founder, Jimmy Logan, he sips his favourite Spanish champagne and prepares for the day ahead, doing what he's always done best – welcoming guests to another Rawdon's specialty establishment.*

Few people succeed in finding their step in life and journey to a place of resonance where they feel able to fulfil their ultimate purpose. David Rawdon is one of those lucky few that was perfectly placed to follow their dream. "I've been very blessed, as I had one very useful gift – I can visualize something. I can see where it can go," says this trailblazing South African legend.

The renowned hotelier's creative insight has been put to excellent use, shaping memorable landmarks such as Rawdon's Hotel in Nottingham Road (Natal), The Lanzerac in Stellenbosch, The Marine in Hermanus and his current lodgings, The Lord Milner in Matjiesfontein.

Spurred on by his love for antiques and a flair for interior decorating, he also undertook several high profile decorating commissions. These included the Tongaat Group headquarters in Tongaat, Fleur du Cap in Somerset West for the Rembrandt Group and the Drostdy Hotel in Graaff-Reinet. Adds David, "My whole life has been like a hobby. I remember thinking it all just suited me."

Who better to speak first-hand of this innovative hotelier than Liz McGrath of Cellars-Hohenort and The Plettenberg fame, who purchased The Marine from him in 1997. "David Rawdon has always been a living legend in the hotel industry. When he and his brother started Rawdon's Hotel in Nottingham Road, he was well ahead of his time and produced the equivalent of an English Country House Hotel – the first in South Africa. I was not lucky enough to visit Rawdon's Hotel, but it was wonderfully successful, and became a household word for elegance. Then came Lanzerac, where I first met David and enjoyed many happy visits to an hotel that was full of charm and warmth, and reflected his character as a really progressive hotelier."

"In 1980 we were all agog when David bought The Marine Hotel in Hermanus. His wonderful refurbishment of this fine old hotel took him five years. In 1985, when I had bought the Cellars-Hohenort in Cape Town, I remember visiting The Marine to get some tips from the guru of the hotel industry, David Rawdon. Never did I imagine that one day I would take over The Marine!"

David's refurbishment of The Marine was so enticing, that when McGrath paid a social visit to Hermanus, she was inspired enough to buy the venue! "Buying the hotel was really a mistake – I had no intention of doing so! Having two hotels seemed one too many anyway, but on a wet blustery day I drove to Hermanus with a friend to watch the whales. We had lunch at The Marine and I fell in love with this fine historic building, and the rest is history!"

Says McGrath: "I had a hard act to follow, as everybody in Hermanus loved David and adored his Sunday lunches and his delicious desserts which he made himself and served to all and sundry with great aplomb. David handed over his "baby" to me, knowing that I would love it and care for it as much as he did. He still pops in on various occasions and is always warm, friendly and charming and shows his approval of my latest developments. David also shows his approval of the way in which I have used his previous collection of antiques".

### **THE BIRTH OF BOUTIQUE HOTELS - NOTTINGHAM ROAD**

David Duncan Rawdon was, by his own admission, lacking in ambition as a young man. Born in Durban in 1924, he was the eldest of three sons of dentist Dr George and his wife Marie Rawdon. Educated at Hilton College, he was a keen rugby player and went on to represent Northern Transvaal in 1944. David also served in the South African Air Force in World War II (1944 to 1945) at Foggia Air Force base in Italy as a gunner in 31 Squadron, ranked W.O.2. "I went to the war as a rear gunner. We were night bombers near the end of the war, and had a lovely time. I saved a bit of money, and when the war was over, I could afford a second hand car. Dad owned an old homestead at Everton and I played rugby there twice a weekend and had a paradise life."

As time went on David's parents became concerned over the non-existent career path of their son, and after threatening him with the option of becoming a rat catcher, his father suggested that he manage a horse breeding farm in Nottingham Road.

"Dad had given money to my brother and I in a peculiar way – we got 600 pounds each and I wanted to invest mine. I started my first job when my neighbour Mrs. Reynolds had an idea to operate a partnership as a mobile hawkker going from farm to farm."

This drive-to catering enterprising started in a basic way. "We visited 20 farms a day in a three-ton converted army dental lorry selling basics such as sugar and tobacco and everything a general store had. But the problem was you couldn't take a holiday and I made a mistake as I never took a "handlanger" with me, and I had to stop in different places just to sell a box of matches. It also taught me never to run out of anything. I did it for four years and learnt a lot, but it was quite an effort."

Envisioning something better for his sons, it was their American father who then suggested that the brothers start a small family hotel.

"Dad asked if I'd like to run a hotel at Nottingham Road and I said 'Yes – I'd love that'. It was a new concept in hotels, as it was a small, private venue which had to be on the national road."

No land was available for four years, so my dad asked if I'd like to go to the famous hotel school in Lausanne, France, to study. My brother Graham said, 'if you don't go, I'd like to go.' Graham then did a four year stint in Lausanne, while David learnt the basics of housekeeping the hard way.

In that time a piece of land came onto the market. After Graham's return, 50 acres of land was bought for 50 pounds per acre. It was bare veld with nothing on it and David was given the task of building the hotel. The brothers built a dam and David laid out the garden with the help of their parent's chauffer-cum-gardener, Ephraim. Together David and Ephraim planted every tree.

The building had got to window height when Dr Rawdon died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Although Marie Rawdon's friends tried to dissuade her from continuing, she felt the project was her husband's dream, and construction of Rawdon's forged ahead for two years until its opening in 1954.

“We opened the hotel, but what I knew about hotel keeping was negligible, so my initial duty was manning the bar. After some time, my mother came to me and said my brother was tired of being in the kitchen, and that I must go and work there. I said – ‘Good heavens! I’m a gardener and a barman, and now I must sit in the kitchen all day as well?’ But I didn’t weary of how many times I had to make something. I said to my mom – you teach me the five basics and leave me for a week. I used my ingenuity and I found it so intriguing. I wouldn’t go into the kitchen for my pleasure though, but at The Marine I eventually would make 20 different puddings, including bread and butter puddings with marmalade, or use recipes that people gave me for lovely chocolate mousse.”

On the passing of David’s father, Marie Rawdon gave her sons their furniture. This was used to give character to the hotel. They also incorporated the family’s old china – “so it really had the appearance and feel of a private home. For this we charged two guineas for dinner, bed and breakfast.

It was during the decorating phase of Rawdon’s Hotel that David’s love of interiors crystallized.

“I knew nothing about china, but I was already deeply interested in furniture and I used to go to every auction and pick up knick-knacks. I had to supervise the decoration of the hotel and it was then that my talent for dressing furniture and buildings came to the fore.”

#### **A NEW VISION - LANZERAC**

While the brothers broke new ground when they pioneered the first “home from home” at Nottingham Road, which was in stark contrast to the current commercial hotels of the time - it was David’s flair for décor and furnishings, combined with quality food, that soon became the hallmark of all his hotels.

His coup in crafting a gracious country hotel came about after many visits to relatives in the Cape. “I used to visit my aunt in Stellenbosch at Kleine Zalze. I often went trout fishing at Lanzerac, and I thought what a lovely hotel the farm would make.

Biding his time, Lanzerac eventually came up for auction. “The purchase had to be agreed by a magistrate as you couldn’t just buy a farm – so I made an appointment with the lawyer, Mr Cluver. He asked me if I’d told the magistrate that every room would have its own bathroom, which was a potential obstacle for the sale.” Instead of getting opposition for the purchase of the property and construction of the hotel, by some fluke the magistrate remembered David’s father and approved the sale. “It was amazing, as I paid 18 000 quid which was about R36 000!”

With financial help from mother Marie and brother, Graham, the trio took ownership of the property in 1958. David then spent a year of intense renovation and restructuring, turning fowl pens, stables, cow sheds and kraals into fetching bedrooms that drew both local and overseas guests. With a small team of builders he designed and oversaw the work himself.

Thriving on his outings to auctions and yard sales, he bought up neglected furniture, which he revived into eye-catching period pieces. “I got wonderful bargains, and the whole of Lanzerac also had Georgian windows and lots of teak – so they made Lanzerac.

Converting the Lanzerac Wine Farm into Lanzerac Hotel, this magnificent homestead became not only one of the finest hotels in the country, but in 1975 was also named as one of the top 300 hotels in the world. “My brother and I went into partnership and we opened the doors to the public in 1959. With every room having a bathroom we were treading new ground.”

Juggling management of two establishments, the brothers finally decided to swop hotels – Graham taking Rawdon’s and David the Lanzerac. “It was then that I found what I really wanted to do,” recalls David. “I had Lanzerac for 30 years and it went from strength to strength. It was a beautiful place and it just caught on. We were booked up three months ahead for our Sunday suppers and it was very inexpensive. We also had pub lunches, which were filled with businessmen from Stellenbosch.”

“The Stellenbosch Farmers Winery showed an interest in the name. They produced Lanzerac Rosé in quite a swanky bottle. They arranged to lease the farm and used the name, and helpfully tarred the road. Tongaat gave me bricks at a reasonable price and I was able to construct a big circle.

Due to our popularity we never advertised, as it was never necessary as we were associated with the wine. When students started taking over the venue, I felt that Lanzerac had done its 30-year run and I sold it in 1988.

### THE MAGIC OF MATJIESFONTEIN

“I then bought The Marine in Hermanus very cheaply and did all I could to revitalize that, making sure every room had a shower and television. Lanzerac had needed refurbishment, but I didn’t want to do it second time round, so I sold it so I was able to concentrate on The Marine.”

He bought The Marine in 1980, reopened it in 1985 and sold it to Liz McGrath in 1997. “When The Marine was 14 years old and also ready for a redo, I had had enough because I was already in my 70’s - so I sold it to Liz McGrath.”

While David used the locales of Nottingham Road, Stellenbosch and Hermanus to his advantage, it’s the old-world charm of Matjiesfontein that really captured his heart. “My mother told me about Matjiesfontein after the war. She was a domestic science teacher from Kimberley and she told me about the hot soup which one could get if one stopped at the station, which was always so hot the train whistled before you could finish it. I’d heard of the area several times, but the hotel wasn’t viable unless you owned the whole village. So I came up with my mother to see what was possible. It took a year for the sale to go through.”

To know Matjiesfontein, is to really understand David Rawdon. It is this quaint little oasis situated on the N1 national highway that has been able to house all the things this influential innovator holds so dear – an array of antique collections big and small, and most importantly, a classic *grande dame*, The Lord Milner Hotel.

In addition to the old architecture and furnishings of the 58-roomed Lord Milner, the unique surrounds of the Koup Karoo (a Khoi word meaning “caul fat”) shape this country experience with vegetation and geological fossil remnants dating back to the ice age and the time when the Karoo lay beneath 500 meters of water. The town lies in the Great Karoo, the WWF’s Nama Karoo eco-region.

Steeped in history and folklore, the hamlet is often associated with author and feminist activist Olive Schreiner, who lived there from 1890 – 1892. Positioned 27 kilometers from Laingsburg, the town was founded in 1884 by legendary Scot, James Douglas Logan, who finished the town in 1899 complete with street lamp posts imported from London. Straddling both the banks of the Matjies River and the railway line between Cape Town and Johannesburg, the settlement became a popular stopover for travellers to fill up with water for steam locomotives. During the Anglo-Boer War (1899

–1902), Matjiesfontein also became a British military stronghold, which saw The Lord Milner Hotel turned into a convalescent hospital for British soldiers.

A visit here allows you to step back in time to the Anglo-Boer War and to Queen Victoria's England.

Current attractions include a Railway Museum with a station masters office of the late 1800s and the original signal room; The Marie Rawdon Museum which exhibits nostalgic items from the Victorian era, and a Transport Museum with a vintage steam train and carriages, and vintage cars from the 1930-1960's era such as Royal Daimlers, Chevys, Dodges and a Jaguar MK8. An authentic double-decker London bus also offers a daily whirlwind "tour" past revellers pit-stopping at the Laird's Arms, an old pub with well-worn Oregon pine floors.

David purchased Matjiesfontein in its entirety during the late 1960's and after detailed and loving restoration work opened it to the public in 1970. As the kindred spirit of Logan, he once again made the town's hospitality accessible to an eclectic range of travellers lured to this one-of-a-kind location. So successful was he in putting Matjiesfontein (translated from Afrikaans as "fountain of little mats") back on the map, that in 1979, it was declared a National Heritage Site - paying tribute to both Logan and Rawdon, whose love and dedication transformed the area into a hospitable refuge.

"All my hotels have been important, exciting and different, but Matjiesfontein which was a real struggle, is probably closest to my heart because I hope it will go on forever." To consolidate his dream he has placed the entire village in an Educational Trust with his two nephews and younger brother Benjamin as trustees.

Totally content now living in his beloved Lord Milner with an assortment of antiques collected over a lifetime, he also retains a contingent of loyal staff. From village entertainer, John Theunissen, who has worked for him for 24 years, to gardener Raymond Crowley who has clocked up 36 years from The Lanzerac days. Crowley only has praise for the veteran: "Mr Rawdon has always made my heart full of joy. I love him. He worked very hard in his young days and he was in the kitchen of The Marine from 7am standing there making puddings."

"He was always very strict because he expects quality. He was a hard worker. If ever he saw something wasn't right at the Lanzerac, for example, stompies on the ground, he'd bend down and pick them up. When he left Lanzerac I made a promise I'd remain with him. He's done so much for me and I'm so proud that he's made me a trustee of the Matjiesfontein Educational Trust."

#### **REVITALIZATION OF A KOUP KAROO LANDMARK – THE LORD MILNER**

The once elegant Lord Milner is a large double story with three castellated towers. Victorian "broekie lace" decorates the front wall and balconies, and inside an imposing mahogany staircase leads to the bedrooms. Heavy drapes and tiled fireplaces recall parlours of long past, and most furnishings remain Victorian in style.

"I've had the place for 41 years and have been living in Matjiesfontein's old jail for the last four years – I adore it!" As such, David's focus stays faithful to this historical attraction, and his upcoming plans for the village include restoring the main house and upgrading the gardens. His ability to visualize the results that the potential restoration of this tiny town would hold was clearly once one of the motivating factors in buying Matjiesfontein. "I don't know if it was just a thought that grabbed my

imagination. Filling in the gaps while waiting for my mother to sign to buy the place, I thought, ‘I must be mad, as its so rundown.

Apparently I always used to ask my mom – why are we here and what are we supposed to do? I’ve got great faith that everything always comes right!” The legacy that he is now pleased to leave behind is the Matjiesfontein Educational Trust. “I took pride in keeping Matjiesfontein as it is. It can’t be sold.”

Does he view the challenges of the contemporary hospitality industry as being any different now? “Its changed a lot as there are so many up-market hotels and the public expect more, because they are paying more My advice to other hoteliers is that establishments have got to be unique because these days they’ve all become the same.”

In addition to his unique establishments the Rawdon charisma has always been a vital part in this industry giant’s success. “You please the best you can. I find people very pleasant. I just like them - its not a sweat. If you enjoy something it rubs off. I’ve never come back from the dining room feeling unhappy. I feel peace. I actually enjoy it. It’s not irksome to me at all. If it was it would show. I wouldn’t give it up for all the tea in China!”

#### **THE CULMINATION OF A LIFE WELL-LIVED**

The affable hotelier’s reputation for elegant decoration saw him lend his creative talents to The Drostdy in Graaff-Reinet and Durban Club in 1977, Rembrandt’s Court House in Johannesburg in 1980 and Fleur du Cap in Somerset West 1981. Earlier commissions also included Amnzimnyama, Tongaat Group Headquarters at Tongaat. “I always loved old things and was crazy about antiques. If I had a day off I’d go straight to the auctioneers. I don’t think I would ever have dealt well with a fussy homeowner though, as I started fresh working for companies, not private jobs. So I never bought anything I didn’t like. I used everything. I did all the furnishings – the curtains and covers, carpets –I was lucky in a way that I never had any person that I did things for that I had any complaints. It was meant to be and most people were very complimentary. Then I did a house for Dr Rupert, which was like writing an exam. But I’ve always loved my work and people too. If a person is difficult and impossible they tend to attract more negative things, but the average person is delightful.”

Well-respected for his role pioneering character hotels, what does he personally regard his most significant contribution to the hospitality industry? “I tell you what we were first at was Rawdon’s Hotel’s Ladies Bar. Women weren’t allowed into pubs so we served drinks from the storeroom. The way around the law was to make the licensed area from the storeroom, so we didn’t have a bar just a serving post. The difference then was that ladies were in the bar and it made it more popular. We poured outside and a waiter brought drinks in on a tray – it was a great success!”

David is exceedingly humble about his reputation as progressive innovator. Have there been entrepreneurs that he has found inspirational? “Dr Anton Rupert, the second richest man in South Africa from Graaff-Reinet who was completely self made. I was very flattered to be put in his autobiography. There he said he’d chosen the best. He had a very interesting life. Also Sol Kerzner. I can’t say I admire all he’s done and his hotels are not my scene, but I think some of the things he’s done are quite amazing.”

Looking back on a hugely successful career, does he have any regrets? “The only thing I would have done differently is that I should have bought the Drostdy Hotel. But I haven’t led an extravagant life, I was always amazed that I had a very satisfying life.”

With the help of crutches, this 85-year old leading light still mans The Lord Milner. From welcoming new arrivals at reception to doing the rounds at dinnertime, he clearly still thrives on the exchange with guests. “I just love it. I wouldn’t change it for the world. I feel gratitude because I’ve been so content. I’ve have had a wonderful life and did something I really loved.”

Interview conducted in July 2009 at Matjiesfontein.

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## MEDIA RELEASE - 2009

### - DAVID RAWDON -

#### ◆ HOTEL LORD ◆ PIONEER ◆ GURU ◆ ENTREPRENEUR ◆ LIVING LEGEND

AS a skilled decorator, sociable homebody and workaholic, David Rawdon was blessed with the perfect tools to make him one of South Africa's leading lights in the hospitality industry. Spurred on by his deep passion for building, gardening and beautifying, the Rawdon magic has been used to enliven some of South Africa's most notable hotels, Rawdon's Hotel in Nottingham Road (Natal), The Lanzerac in Stellenbosch, The Marine in Hermanus and his current lodgings, The Lord Milner in Matjiesfontein.

Now 85 years-old, David still fulfills his role as hotelier *par excellence* in this quaint Koup Karoo hamlet. With the help of crutches, he mans The Lord Milner, welcoming new arrivals at reception and doing the rounds at dinnertime. As seasoned hotelier, he still thrives on his rapport with guests. "I just love it. I wouldn't change it for the world. I've have had a wonderful life and did something I really loved."

David's was nudged into his current career path by his father Dr George Rawdon, who suggested his sons open a hotel in Nottingham Road to serve commuting Michaelhouse parents. "It was a new concept in hotels, as it was a small, private venue which had to be on the national road."

While his brother prepared for the venture by going to hotel school in Lausanne, France, David learnt the basics of housekeeping. When land became available in the area, 50 acres was bought for 50 pounds per acre. It was bare veld and David had the task of building the hotel. The construction had got to window height when Dr Rawdon died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Despite the setback, the family opened the hotel. "What I knew about hotel keeping was negligible, so my initial duty was manning the bar. After some time my mother Marie said my brother was tired of being in the kitchen and that I must go and work there. I said – 'Good heavens! I'm a gardener and a barman, and now I must sit in the kitchen all day as well?' But I didn't weary of how many times I had to make something. I said to my mom – you teach me the five basics and leave me for a week. I used my ingenuity and I found it so intriguing."

Marie gave the boys the family furniture, which was used to give character to the hotel. They also incorporated their old china – "so it really had the appearance and feel of a private home. For this we charged two guineas for dinner, bed and breakfast.

It was during the decorating phase of Rawdon's Hotel that David's love of interiors crystallized.

"I new nothing about china, but I was already deeply interested in furniture and I used to go to every auction and pick up knick-knacks. I had had to supervise the decoration of the hotel and it was then that my talent for dressing furniture and buildings came to the fore."

Another novel aspect of Rawdon's Hotel was their innovative Ladies Bar concept, which saw women able to socialize in a previously men-only domain. "Women weren't allowed into pubs so we served drinks from the storeroom. The way around the law was to make the licensed area from the storeroom, so we never had a bar just a serving post. The difference then was that ladies were in the bar and it made it more popular. We poured outside and a waiter brought drinks in on a tray – it was a great success!"

With Rawdon's flourishing, David envisioned a new opportunity constructing a hotel at Lanzerac Wine Farm. This magnificent homestead soon became not only one of the finest hotels in the country, but in 1975 was also named as one of the top 300 hotels in the world. "My brother and I went into partnership and we opened the doors to the public in 1959. With every room having a bathroom we were treading new ground."

Juggling management of two establishments, the brothers decided to swap hotels – Graham taking Rawdon's and David the Lanzerac. "It was then that I found what I really wanted to do.

I had Lanzerac for 30 years and it went from strength to strength. It was a beautiful place and it just caught on. We were booked up three months ahead for our Sunday suppers and it was very inexpensive. We also had pub lunches, which were filled with businessmen from Stellenbosch."

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He then bought The Marine in Hermanus at a good price. "I did all I could to revitalize it, making sure every room had a shower and television. Lanzerac had needed refurbishment, but I didn't want to do it second time round, so I sold it so I was able to concentrate on The Marine."

He bought The Marine in 1980, reopened it in 1985 and sold it to Liz McGrath in 1997. "When The Marine was 14 years old and also ready for a redo, I had had enough because I was already in my 70's so I sold it to Liz McGrath."

Enticed by the old-world charm of Matjiesfontein, his most long-lasting venture became the settlement's Lord Milner Hotel. Steeped in history and folklore, the tiny village is excellently located on the N1 national highway. A visit here allows you to step back in time to the Anglo-Boer War and to Queen Victoria's England. Current attractions include a Railway Museum with a station masters office of the late 1800s and the original signal room; The Marie Rawdon Museum which exhibits nostalgic items from the Victorian era, and a Transport Museum with vintage cars from the 1930-1960's era such as Royal Daimlers, Dodges and a Jaguar MK8. An authentic double-decker London bus also offers a daily "tour" past revelers pit-stopping at the Laird's Arms, an old pub with well-worn Oregon pine floors.

David purchased Matjiesfontein in its entirety during the late 1960's and after detailed and loving restoration work opened it to the public in 1970. As the kindred spirit of the village's Scottish founder

Jimmy Logan, he once again made The Lord Milner's hospitality accessible to an eclectic range of travelers. So successful was he in putting Matjiesfontein back on the map, that in 1979, it was declared a National Heritage Site - paying tribute to both Logan and Rawdon, whose love and dedication transformed the area into a hospitable refuge.

Rawdon's charisma has been a vital part in this industry giant's success. "You please the best you can. I find people very pleasant. I just like people, it's not a sweat. I've never come back from the dining room feeling unhappy. It's not irksome to me at all. If it was, it would show. I wouldn't give it up for all the tea in China!"

Fellow hotelier Liz McGrath of Cellars-Hohenort and The Plettenberg fame, who purchased The Marine from him in 1997, speaks first-hand of the Rawdon magic "David has always been a living legend in the hotel industry. When he and his brother Graham started Rawdon's Hotel in Nottingham Road, he was well ahead of his time and produced the equivalent of an English Country House Hotel – the first in South Africa. Rawdon's Hotel became a household word for elegance. Then came Lanzerac, where I first met David and enjoyed many happy visits to an hotel that was full of charm and warmth, and reflected his character as a really progressive hotelier."

"In 1980 we were all agog when David bought the Marine Hotel in Hermanus. His wonderful refurbishment of this fine old hotel took him five years. In 1985, when I had bought the Cellars-Hohenort in Cape Town, I remember visiting The Marine to get some tips from the guru of the hotel industry, David Rawdon. Never did I imagine that one day I would take over The Marine!"

David's refurbishment of The Marine was so enticing, that when McGrath paid a social visit to Hermanus, she was inspired enough to buy the venue! But David was a hard act to follow.

Adds McGrath: "Everybody in Hermanus loved David and adored his Sunday lunches and his delicious desserts which he made himself and served to all and sundry with great aplomb. David handed over his "baby" to me, knowing that I would love it and care for it as much as he did."

Armed with a love for antiques and a superb flair for interior decorating, the early years saw David being hired for decorating commissions such as the Tongaat Group headquarters in Tongaat, Fleur du Cap in Somerset West for the Rembrandt Group and the Drostdy Hotel in Graaff-Reinet. Says David, "My whole life has been like a hobby. I remember thinking it all just suited me. I always loved old things and was crazy about antiques. If I had a day off I'd go straight to the auctioneers. I don't think I would ever have dealt well with a fussy homeowner though, as I started fresh working for companies, not private jobs. So I never bought anything I didn't like. I used everything. I did all the furnishings – the curtains and covers, carpets – I was lucky in a way that I never had any person that I did things for that I had any complaints. Most people were very complimentary."

Are the challenges of the hospitality industry any different now? "It's changed a lot as there are so many up-market hotels now and the public expect more because they are paying more. My advice to other hoteliers is that you have got to be unique, because these days they've all become the same."

David is exceedingly humble about his reputation as progressive trailblazer. Have there been any other entrepreneurs that he has found particularly inspirational? "Dr Anton Rupert, the second richest man in South Africa from Graaff-Reinet who was completely self-made. I was very flattered to be put in his autobiography, where he said he'd chosen the best."

Unassuming and genial, this legendary trailblazer describes his odyssey as hotelier extraordinaire as exhilarating and fun. “I was always amazed that I had a very satisfying life.”

#### ▶ RAWDON MISCELLANEA

- ▶ He’s an avid fan of the television soapie *Isidingo*
- ▶ He’s crazy about horses and German shepherd dogs
- ▶ He’s drunk Spanish champagne everyday for 10 years
- ▶ He follows this up with Brandy every night
- ▶ He saw service as a gunner in the SA Air Force in WW II
- ▶ He’s got 21 God-children
- ▶ He owns the whole Churchill book collection
- ▶ He often sits reading in his car with the sunroof open
- ▶ He’s always had a serious penchant for shopping

#### ▶ IN BRIEF

DATE OF BIRTH 1924

CITY Durban

HOME Matjiesfontein, Koup Karoo

EDUCATED Hilton College, Natal

HOTELS Rawdon’s Hotel (Nottingham Road),  
 The Lanzerac (Stellenbosch)  
 The Marine (Hermanus)  
 The Lord Milner Hotel (Matjiesfontein)

#### DECORATING COMMISSIONS

The Drostdy Hotel (Graaff-Reinet) – Historical Homes SA Ltd 1977

The Durban Club (Durban) 1977

Spinney Green – Cullinan Company HQ (Olifantsfontein) 1979

Kelvin Grove Club (Cape Town) 1980

Rembrandt's Company Court House (Johannesburg) 1980

Fleur du Cap (Somerset West) 1981

Amnzimnyama, Tongaat Group Headquarters (Tongaat)

Interview conducted July 2009 at Matjiesfontein.

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