



A British Heart Beating for Europe: Cosmo Russell¹

by Henny Shotter

The 'Russels 'is a small development off Maidstone Road next to Parapet House. It remembers a family who was much respected and became quickly an important part in Lenham's community.

The telephone rang on the shop floor of Aylesford Paper Mill. The foreman answered the call and then shouted across the room: 'Nick, your friend is on the phone'.

The distinctive voice at the other end of the telephone line belonged to Cosmo Russell. Nick Osbourne, already then a Parish Councillor, says: 'He was the finest of Gentlemen. Always courteous and never said a bad word against anyone.'

Cosmo's involvement with the Parish Council had started when some trees needed removing in the garden of Parapet House, where he, his wife Agnes, and their six children lived.



Parapet House (photo taken in 2024)

¹ We are grateful to Nick Russel for sharing information about his father and to Nick Osbourne and Carole Robinson for sharing some of their memories

As he was a person who was interested in public affairs, he also took an interest in the affairs of Lenham. One of his well-known phrases was that ‘people should get involved and get on with it’ (*The Times* 14.11.2003).

Who then was Cosmo Russell?

Born in 1911 in Vienna to an aristocratic British father and an aristocratic German mother, he had a privileged childhood. He was educated at Eton and at Trinity College, Oxford, two very British institutions. However, ‘he was born to be a European’ wrote the *Times* in their obituary on 14th November 2003. Cosmo’s grandfather, Lord Odo Russell, had been involved in 1878 in the Berlin negotiations with Bismarck on behalf of Disraeli’s government. Getting politically involved in Europe was thus a family tradition. After the outbreak of WWII, Cosmo Russell joined the 60th Rifle Corps. He was fluent in several languages: English, French, Dutch, and German, which proved to be of great benefit to the forces. He rose to the rank of major and played an important part in the liberation of the Netherlands, for which he was mentioned in dispatches. He was awarded the Bronze Star and the Order of Nassau.

After the war, many people hoped that there would never again be a war in Europe, a hope which was shattered in 2022 when Russia invaded the Ukraine.

In 1949, Cosmo Russell went to Strasbourg and joined the Council of Europe² as director of the Communications Department. In this role he was involved in drafting the European Convention of Human Rights. He received much acclaim in this role.

In 1961, when Agnes and Cosmo’s six children were going to school in England, Cosmo decided to work for a Public Relations company based in England, a job more suited to the changed family circumstances. He added Danish and Italian to his repertoire of foreign languages and worked from 1971 as a translator for the Foreign Office. In preparation for Britain joining the Common Market under Prime Minister Edward Heath, Cosmo and a small team of colleagues translated and interpreted the Treaty of Accession which formed the basis for Britain joining. This same team later set up the UK Translation Service for the European Commission.

It must have been an important occasion for Cosmo and Agnes when they met the Queen. Agnes Russell accompanied her husband throughout his career and became a stalwart member of each local community. She was very much involved in organising events in St. Mary’s church here in Lenham and was much loved by all who knew her.

Both Cosmo Russell and Agnes were of course customers in the shops in Lenham and Carole Robinson, who worked at the time at Lurcock’s grocery shop, remembers discussions about the European influence on British politics. She recalls that Cosmo Russell said: ‘European rules are only guidelines. Only Guidelines’.

We don’t know how Cosmo Russell would have viewed later European treaties, but we can be sure that he would have liked to see a strong Britain in a strong Europe. This was not to be. The *Times* wrote in his obituary: ‘He remained to the end an avid advocate of European integration’.

Cosmo retired at the age of 75 after having crossed the English channel more than a thousand times on the ferry, surviving, as he said on Belgian Fish and Chips.

In their retirement Cosmo and Agnes Russell played an active role in Lenham, especially with the church community, the Royal British Legion and the local Conservative Association. Agnes Russell died three weeks before her husband, who passed away on October 16th, 2003.

² Council of Europe is an international organisation 'with the goal of upholding human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Europe' see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Council_of_Europe accessed 5.8.2024

They are both buried in the cemetery in Lenham and very fondly remembered by those who knew them.