

# The West Obituaries

Edited by Patrick Cornish

## Compassion in the world of commerce

**JAMES ALAN RICHARDS**

**Born:** Adelaide, October 1913

**Died:** Perth, November 2004

Wimbledon has been the stage for many Australian tennis victories — but during Jim Richards' term as WA Agent-General in London there were wins of a more general kind. The State's business prospects were given a boost during many social evenings.

It was not that trade and contacts were specifically on the menu. It was more that the homely atmosphere and domestic setting were conducive to smiles, handshakes and pledges of formal deals to be signed in the near future.

Joyce Richards, who enjoyed cooking for such occasions and was a great helpmate to her husband during his three-year term from 1975 to 1978, was glad to have the Wimbledon house as their official residence.

Previous WA agents-general had used an apartment above the office in the heart of London but the then premier, Sir Charles Court, agreed to the house purchase after asking the newly retired businessman to represent the State in the United Kingdom.

The Richards' time in London was marked not only by commercial progress but by informality. The chauffeur was often invited in for a meal, rather than being forced to sit outside in the official car.

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Formality was reserved for such occasions as meeting The Queen. An invitation to a garden party at Buckingham Palace came soon after the Australians' arrival. Jim and Joyce were touched that their host came to chat to them and ask about their family, almost immediately after coming down the Palace steps into the garden.

Those close to Jim Richards, however, knew his priority was to help



people in need rather than dress up in finery and exchange pleasantries with notables. His boyhood had thrown up challenges that surely set him on course to organisations such as Torchbearers for Legacy and the Lions clubs' Save Sight campaign.

His mother, Alice, died of cancer when he was nine. One of his three younger brothers, Jeff, had physical problems that meant Jim learned early on the meaning of "duty of care". He joined the Toc H service organisation that helped disabled people get out to parks and cinemas, for example, in wheelchairs.

Feeling fortunate to have a job — any job — during the Depression, he worked in an Adelaide department store but heeded advice to spend some spare time learning about marketing and salesmanship. This served him well after World War II — during which he did army service in the Pacific — when Ampol was looking for bright young men to compete with bigger and more established oil companies.

He was asked to report on his sales progress after the first week. "Only one five-gallon drum of motor oil," he said without much pride. The other recruit had not even managed that, so Mr Richards felt that he might be getting somewhere, however

slowly. Ampol's move into the Queensland market gave a chance to test his ideas farther afield and, at the end of 1953, WA beckoned. The discovery of oil at Learmonth was a huge coup for the company and Mr Richards was offered the post of branch manager.

Within a year, Perth had 20 service stations. A fuel depot opened at Fremantle. Ampol agencies were launched in country towns.

The same Statewide thinking applied to his involvement in Lions, when the organisation opened its first clubs in WA. He accompanied the WA president to the north, chartering Lions bases in Wyndham, Broome and Port Hedland.

When Perth's lord mayor, Sir Thomas Wardle, was mustering a group of six businessmen to form a Keep Australia Beautiful Council in WA, the name Richards was among the first on his list. Just before Mr Richards returned to WA from London in 1978, Sir Charles invited him to become chairman of the WA Week Council, whose responsibilities included honouring the State's citizens of the year in various categories.

WA Week, an important part of the State's 150th anniversary celebrations in 1979, was chaired by Mr Richards for three more years. The Order of the British Empire was formal recognition of his contribution in this and other fields.

Setting up libraries, in the two retirement villages where he and Joyce eventually lived, was his most recent community activity. Buying, shelving and lending out books — as well as listening to Beethoven piano works — was a tranquil pastime for someone who had spent so many years in the hectic world of sales.

It was also much less noisy than standing next to Joyce while she was barracking for East Perth, a job she took to with serious energy.

Jim Richards, who was widowed in April, is survived by his daughter, Jenny Mulholland, and sons, Alan, Bill and Robert, seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren; and by his brothers, Bob and Ian.

The James Richards Library, at the RAAF Association retirement village at Meriwa, is just one legacy of a businessman concerned with people as well as profits.