

Michael McKeefry of Maghera

By Paddy Heaney

It could be said of the late Mickey McKeefry that while he was wise to this world, he most certainly wasn't of this world.

He was worldly in the sense that he managed to keep a furniture business afloat while raising a family and being a steadfast supporter of his GAA club.

But that is where his connection to the stereotype of the local businessman abruptly ends.

Winston Churchill described Russia as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

Churchill could just have easily been talking about Mickey McKeefry.

Try this for size.

He was a businessman with absolutely no interest in material possessions, status symbols, or for that matter – money!

And that's only the start.

Over a period of nearly 50 years, he ran a furniture business, yet he cared even less about home furnishings than he did about money.

For Mickey, it was all about the thrill of the sale.

Take the time his wife Betty and their children were eating dinner at the family home in Meeting House Avenue. Mickey marched into the front room, unplugged the TV and proceeded to carry it back out of the house.

"Where are you going with our TV?" someone enquired.

"I've just sold it," said Mickey.

But it was never about the money.

The following scene was a common occurrence in the shop. Someone would pay Mickey in cash. It could be a few thousand pounds. If another customer came into the shop, Mickey would stuff the cash under a sofa cushion. But if things were really busy, he might forget about the wad of notes entirely. Later, when he did remember about the money, he'd forget where he had hidden it. Cue a mass search of the premises.

When business was good, he just keep getting bigger.

At one time he had stores in Maghera, Ballymoney, Ballymena and Sligo!

Then, in times of recession, he could just as easily switch into survival mode. If the men were paid on a Saturday evening and he was fit to open again on Monday morning – it was mission accomplished.

At the club after his funeral, Libby Gallagher remembered a summer's day when the phone was ringing off the hook. It was pandemonium. Just one of those days. Mickey sent her down the street for two 99s. When Libby returned, he closed the door of the office and they sat outside in the summer sun, eating their ice-creams and having the best of craic for a solid hour. Then they went back to work.

He wasn't your regular, conventional boss.

His generosity was astonishing.

In the summer of 1990, I got a job with a local business that paid £1 per hour. Back then, that was the going rate. I got £8 a day.

Later that year, I did my first Saturday shift with McKeefry's of Maghera.

Mickey gave me £30.

The cynics and the know-alls will immediately chirp that he might have prospered more in business if he'd been more frugal.

Maybe – but he out-last-ed a lot of skinflints.

The truth of the matter is this, business was only one of Mickey's interests.

He was unceasingly curious about the world around him. In his 90<sup>th</sup> year, he was buying three newspapers a day.

His thirst for knowledge was in evidence from his earliest years. As a pupil at the Fair Hill Primary School in Maghera, the teacher asked the class if anyone knew where the Nicobar Islands were located.

"The Indian Ocean," answered Michael McKeefry, correctly.

"Is there anything else you know about them?" asked the teacher.

Mickey spoke about the islands in detail.

From that day forward, he was 'Nicobar.'

His interests ranged from politics to business to religion to sport, and of course, horse-racing.

The thrill of the sale and the thrill of backing a winner – his two lifelong passions.

But Mickey didn't just read about the world from the safety of his armchair.

He did things.

During the 1980s in a battered and bruised Opel Kadett he took carloads to National League games all over the country.

I know this because I was in the back seat.

He was into jogging and running marathons when no-one else was doing it.

It was the same for stretching and mindfulness and yoga.

In many cases, he wasn't just years ahead, he was decades ahead of the curve.

And he didn't give one damn what anyone thought of him.

He advised his granddaughter Grainne to pay no heed to the opinions of other people.

"Just do what you want, follow your own path," he told her.

He most definitely practised what he preached.

From the cradle to the grave, he stayed resolutely and unflinchingly in his own lane.

And yet, while very much fascinated by the world around him, he was also intrinsically parochial.

His business was never going to be just McKeefry's.

He was passionately proud of his hometown.

It was McKeefry's *of* Maghera.

He loved Maghera.

With his characteristic composure, he watched Watty Graham's Glen rise from the shadows to the stars.

He was on the Glen team that won the club's first junior Championship and it was his grandson, Connor who captained the side that lifted the All-Ireland title in 2024.

He was Maghera to the marrow and Glen to the bone.

When a man like Mickey McKeefry leaves us, it's often said that 'we'll never see the like of him again.'

This is true.

He was unique.

But we're all unique.

What made Mickey different was that he was uniquely ours.

He was Michael McKeefry of Maghera.

PH