

Roger Neill can claim to have produced one of the longest-running UK TV campaigns – for Fox's Glacier Mints. And he helped Sam Wanamaker realise his lifelong dream of rebuilding Shakespeare's Globe. But there is a lot more to the former World President of the International Advertising Association than popular advertising campaigns.

This month's castaway, who lives in Kings Sutton, near Babury, also writes, speaks and conducts masterclasses and workshops around the world on the subject of creativity and innovation.

And having the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment as a client means he can persuade their soloists to leave the bright lights and stage concerts in the village church.

Roger is something of a renaissance man – as at home in Australia, Asia and the USA as in his native England. But his life could have been very different.

His father John was a GP in the mining town of Nuneaton in Warwickshire and assumed Roger would follow in his footsteps and study medicine. But some timely advice from his uncle set him off in a completely different direction.

“I resolved to focus in order to achieve something.

Concentrating on the day job led me to becoming an account executive for a company that was to become Saatchi and Saatchi”

Roger said: “I was sent to boarding school, Uppingham in Rutland, where my father insisted I specialise in the sciences. Now I am grateful – but at the time my head was in art, literature and music. I knew that I did not want the life my father had mapped out for me. So, when I sat my A-Level exams, instead of answering the questions, I wrote letters to the examiners explaining how I wanted to take charge of my life – with the obvious results.

He added: “As many of my school mates headed off to university, it looked as if I was unemployable. My uncle Bill's company was involved in advertising so I went to see him in his Birmingham office to get his advice – and see if he would give me a job.

“Although he did not offer me work he did give me some advice. He said: ‘Leave home. Go to London and get a job in a mail room and take it from there’.”

His uncle, Bill Browne had long been a symbol of escape for young Roger. He was, said Roger: “A vision of a life beyond the net curtains of Nuneaton.”

During the Second World War, Bill took part in the landings in Sicily and then D-Day. He was wounded and invalided out of the army and awarded the military cross after the Normandy landings.

Roger said: “Given my date of birth (June 6, 1944 – D-Day) I found all that sufficiently inspiring – but Bill was also a champion cyclist and, in the 1950s, took part in the Monte Carlo Rally.”



A true renaissance man

Sylvia Vetta meets Roger Neill, a champion of creativity and innovation

So in 1963, taking his inspirational uncle's advice, Roger headed for London – which was just about to start ‘swinging’.

He said: “I found a job as a mail boy in the firm of J Walter Thompson – then the biggest advertising agency in the city. It was clear to me that this wasn't an interesting life. My solution was to take on two extra jobs.

“I also joined a poker club and played twice a day (lunchtime and early or late evening) Among the members was Llewellyn Thomas, the son of Dylan Thomas. He was a fine writer but not a good poker player. My winnings enabled me to live in London. I could not have afforded to live there on a mail boy's pay.

Roger also wrote songs, played the bass guitar and sang in a rock group called The Idle

Hands. He recalled: “We played gigs or rehearsed most evenings so my sleeping hours were few. After delivering the mail, in the afternoon, I had a snooze in the mail room.”

After a couple of years Roger realised that playing poker was a waste of his life – and decided to switch from rock to classical music.

“I resolved to focus in order to achieve something. Concentrating on the day job led me to becoming an account executive for a company that was to become Saatchi and Saatchi. I was lucky enough to be appointed to the board when I was 27.”

He said: “In the 1970s Rowntree's who made Fox's Glacier Mints, was my biggest client. In the office our creation – the bear on the glacier – was likened to a pompous

**Roger Neill in
the Music Gallery
at Oxford's
Ashmolean
Museum**

**Photograph:
Marc West**



In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

chairman of the board and the fox an obnoxious union convenor.”

Roger left Saatchi and Saatchi in 1974 to work for Unilever’s advertising agency, Lintas.

“I became managing director of the London office which looked after its diverse consumer products interests,” he said.

“Wall’s was one of them. I was involved in the successful Wall’s Cornetto advert with that operatic jingle which people all over the world still recall and repeat. After that, the chairman sent me on a tour of Asia with instructions that I should drop in on our Australian office as they had not had a visit for a long time.

“In Sydney, we talked ice cream for a bit and then partied for three days before I took the plane home. Back in London, the chairman

said ‘They seem to like you.’ Unknowingly, I had undergone an Aussie-style interview and passed.”

Roger headed back to Australia to become chairman of the Australia/New Zealand branch of Lintas.

While in Australia, he noticed that many Australians imagine they have no real history apart from aboriginal history. “They don’t pay much attention to the history they have. Because of my love of opera and art I gradually realised they have so much to celebrate.”

Roger showed me a portrait of the author Robert Louis Stevenson by Italian-born Count Girolamo Pieri Ballati Nerli — who had arrived in Australia in November 1885.

In August 1892 he visited Apia in Samoa for

a month where he met Stevenson. Roger researched and wrote a book he has produced about the artist and that portrait.

“Count Nerli’s pictures of the author sold so well, he had something like a production line of them. I set about searching for the original one from 1892. It involved a lot of detective work and this little book is the result.”

Roger also came to admire the work of Australian portrait photographer Walter Barnett, who was born in Melbourne in 1862. As a result of his research, in 2000 Roger curated an exhibition and a book titled *Legends: the art of Walter Barnett* for the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. He also wrote about

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the art of Walter Barnett for the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. He also wrote about Barnett for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

Roger said: "In London, Barnett photographed Rodin, the Prince of Wales and Sarah Bernhardt – who was the most celebrated actress of her time. Barnett's picture of Sarah Bernhardt is published for the first time in my book.

"The reason she suppressed it was probably because she was 65 at the time and preferred to use images of her younger self," Roger said.

While in London, Barnett also photographed the most famous soprano of the time, the Australian soprano Dame Nellie Melba, a connection which sent Roger off on yet another tangent.

"I have been involved in projects to bring her voice to a new generation," he explained.

Recorded music was in its infancy when Melba began recording in 1904. She made more than 100 records and helped to establish the popularity of the gramophone.

Roger explained: "After a lot of detective work we found the original metal masters of her records in Germany. Through the charity Historic Masters we made new 78s on vinyl."

Roger is now working on a project for Decca highlighting the Australian operatic tradition. Called *From Melba to Sutherland* it features 75 Antipodean singers and will be published early next year.

"I spent five blissful years in Sydney," Roger said. "New stuff happened every day and the business seemed to walk in through the door. I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time with the outcome that, in 1987, I was asked to return to work at our London international headquarters."

He recalled: "It was an exciting time, the Iron Curtain had fallen and I was invited to conferences and to teach in Eastern Europe.

"Unusually, I was also invited to Beijing to chair their first-ever national advertising conference. I faced an audience of 10,000. I had never seen so many delegates at a conference before.

"The organisers kept asking me for copies of my speech in advance. I never gave it to them because I assumed, I think rightly, that it was for censorship purposes. Afterwards some delegates came to speak quietly with me saying: 'We have never heard anything like that before'.

"I assumed that the translator had translated what I had said accurately because I had talked about how the market economy, democracy, the rule of law and freedom of speech interconnect with each other."

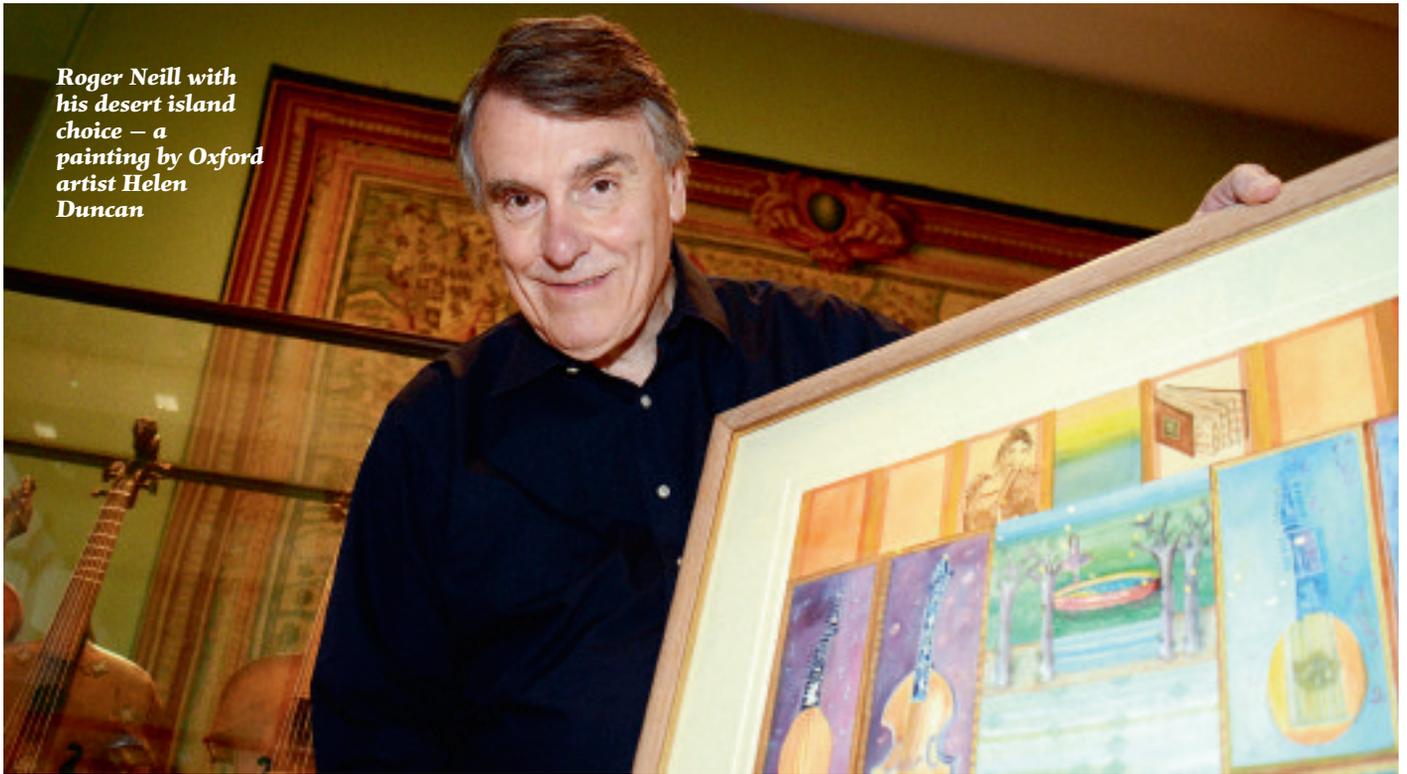
But, after 25 years in advertising, Roger felt that the time had come for a change. His experience with Lintas had given him insight to many different kinds of business and their structures and working patterns. He asked himself what makes some organisations dynamic, innovative and creative – while others fossilise and decline.

He said: "Creative people usually think that the manner in which ideas come to fruition in action is serendipity. My work for Rowntree's, prior to the launch of Jelly Tots, had given me some insight that it is not all about luck. And I had already encountered a systematic way of



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Roger Neill with his desert island choice – a painting by Oxford artist Helen Duncan

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taking new ideas and turning them into action.

“I had met Vincent Nolan when we trained in the Synectics method at Saatchi and Saatchi. Vincent had gone on to found the UK office of Synectics. I joined as international managing partner, helping companies all over the world developing new products and new ways of working.”

Synectics, first developed in the 1950s, is a problem-solving methodology that stimulates thought processes of which the subject may be unaware

When Roger transferred from a career in advertising to one in innovation and creativity, he started to live a double life.

He explained: “I began researching writers and artists and promoting concerts. I have been putting on concerts now for 30 years. My first experience was for the last surviving Victorian concert hall in London, which was in Blackheath where I lived when I returned from Sydney in 1986.

“It had been occupied and divided up by the council and was generally run down. A friend came to see me and said: ‘You are interested in music and know about marketing. We are restoring this great building and need to put on a fundraising concert, can you help?’

“It so happened that the son of the composer Prokofiev, Oleg, was living in Blackheath and another resident was Sir Edward Downes, the expert on Russian music. So we imposed on both of them to get involved.”

As well as taking an interest in living artists and musicians Roger also turned his attention to great artists whom we seem to have forgotten. For the May edition of this magazine he wrote a feature about one of them – John Selby-Bigge – which you can read online at www.oxfordtimes.co.uk.

In 2007, City University in London wanted a director for a new centre for creativity and Roger was interviewed for the post by four professors.

He said: “Before they began to interrogate

me, I said ‘Do you mind if I ask you a question?’ I cannot understand why you are interviewing me. The job specification for this post is that the applicant should have degrees – and I am an ageing rock ‘n’ roller who worked in the mail room instead of going to university.’ They laughed a lot, did not have much of an answer, but they gave me the job and we launched a masters in innovation, creativity and leadership which has done wonderfully well. Many of the students have gone on to set up their own businesses.”

We had talked a lot about Roger’s career and artistic interests, but not yet about his family life. “I have two grown up children from my first marriage, Rachel and Kate – one a social worker and the other a teacher of deaf children,” Roger said.

“I met my second wife, Sophie Wilson, in the early 1990s when I was involved with Sam Wanamaker’s project for the recreation of Shakespeare’s Globe in Southwark, London.

“The chairman of Unilever was also chairman of the Globe and he asked me to help Sam in the role of a part-time unpaid marketing director. It came to fruition with no public funding.

“In my first meeting with Sam I said to him ‘I saw you play Iago to Paul Robeson’s Othello.’ Aged 13 and the first time I had seen a Shakespeare play – it was unforgettable. Sam

stopped concentrating on his acting career in order to build the Globe.”

Sophie and Roger have a 12 year-old daughter Dora. For 20 years Sophie has worked as administrator of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts at Birmingham University.

Roger said: “Living in London was not an option for her and living in Birmingham not an option for me.

“So we took out a map and put a finger down halfway between the two. That is how we came to King’s Sutton.

“As a lover of city life, I never imagined living in a village and did not know whether I would take to it. Now I absolutely adore village life.”

What about his castaway object?

Roger showed me a painting by Oxford artist Helen Duncan.

“This is what I would want to take to the island. We commissioned it for our home and it has lots of personal connections.

“The Broadwood piano featured was made in 1790 and is used for concerts which we hold regularly in our home.

“The pianist in the picture is Alissa Firsova who is a brilliant Russian student at the Royal Academy.

“We have supported her since she was 16. The section outside with the lime trees, and Dora floating miraculously above her paddling pool, make this a very personal choice.”

“The Broadwood piano featured was made in 1790 and is used for concerts which we hold regularly in our home. The pianist in the picture is Alissa Firsova who is a brilliant Russian student at the Royal Academy.”

