

An appreciation of Jocelyn Stevens, publisher and rector of the Royal College of Art

A vibrant and ferocious personality who led the RCA and English Heritage through radical shake-ups, Stevens "ate sharks for breakfast", Charles Saumarez Smith writes

Jocelyn Stevens, who died on 9 October at the age of 82, did not really belong to the art world, but to the world of newspapers. His hobbies were shooting, fishing and skiing. In 1984, however, he was parachuted into the Royal College of Art (RCA) by its then-chairman, George Howard, after Lionel March had left to go to UCLA, to stir up what was regarded by the government as a liberal, complacent and run-down bastion of the arts establishment. He certainly succeeded.

I first encountered Stevens at a meeting not long after he had started when I complained that the RCA had not come up with the promised funding for students on the newly established History of Design programme, run jointly with the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A). I had been in touch with an undersecretary at the department of education and science. I was confronted by a man who was like an angry bull. The following morning I met Roy Strong, the then-director of the V&A, on the tube and he said: "You shouldn't have tried to stand up to that man. He eats sharks for breakfast."

The jury is probably still out at the RCA as to whether Stevens was more good than bad as rector. Overall, he was good, although I have reservations about a management style that relies to such an extent on unrestrained anger. He fired lots of people. He shook it up. He changed the decoration in the Senior Common Room, where he was often to be seen dining with government ministers. He brought in friends and allies as professors. As the college history describes it, "a comprehensive programme of reconstruction, re-equipment and expansion" began. The painting studios next door were given back to the V&A, thereby severing the historic link between art school and museum. Student accommodation was sold. The so-called Stevens Building, designed by the former professor John Miller to house the painting school, was opened by the Duke of Edinburgh in 1994. Named in his honour, it is a monument to Stevens' era of radical shake-up, cost control and centralisation.

Stevens continued eating sharks for breakfast at English Heritage where he was appointed chairman in 1992, taking over from Lord Montagu, with Jennie Page as chief executive. When she was appointed by Hayden Phillips to run the Millennium Commission, he recruited a chief executive from the railway industry, who was fired shortly afterwards for taking his staff out to Christmas lunch at the Dorchester. He cultivated a reputation, which he liked, as a ruthless swine, but actually to meet, he could turn on the charm. And he got things done, including the restoration of the Albert Memorial, Down House in Kent and Eltham Palace.

He wanted to restore Stonehenge and embarked on the first of many plans to bury the road and build a better visitor centre. His *modus operandi* was revealed when he was cross-questioned by the Public Accounts Committee: "I am obsessed by the battle to save our heritage. Everything is a fight, a fight against planners, the experts; Government, one department not agreeing with another department... I fight from dawn to dusk. The chief executive is in the next door office to mine and I scream and shout all day and she has now caught it, we both scream and shout all day."

Born into the purple of the newspaper industry on 14 February 1932, his grandfather was Edward Hulton. His mother, Betty, died of septicaemia shortly after his birth and he was thereafter looked after by nannies in a flat off Baker Street, driven round London by a chauffeur before moving to Scotland to live with his father, Major Greville Stewart-Stevens. He went to school at Eton, boxed, did national service in the Rifle Brigade and was sent down from Trinity College, Cambridge after sending his tutor a postcard from the

Alps saying: "Wish you were here".

After a few years as a playboy and general man-about-town, smashing up an Aston Martin and escorting Princess Alexandra, Stevens bought the magazine *Queen* in the late 1950s with some of the £750,000 he had inherited. He worked closely with Antony Armstrong-Jones and Mark Boxer, both of whom had been at school with him, but also with John Hedgecoe, who he made in-house photographer. From *Queen*, he moved into management, first working for Max Aitken of Beaverbrook Newspapers as managing director of the *Evening Standard*, transferring in 1972 to the *Daily Express*.

What his obituaries have surprisingly said little about is that he was one half of a very effective double act with Vivien Duffield, with whom he lived on Cheyne Walk after the break-up of his marriage to Jane Sheffield in the late 1970s. They went everywhere together and always seemed ideally well matched. Duffield was one of the few people who were much richer than him and he supported her in her many cultural enterprises, including travelling round the world visiting children's museums before the establishment of Eureka! in Halifax.

The only time I ever saw him discomfited was when he was halfway through his speech at the annual RCA Christmas dinner. He stopped, asking to be excused. He went outside and we all heard a loud voice call him out, "You bloody took the car keys!"

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