

SPOTLIGHT ON

MEREDITH BELBIN

The father of Team Roles, **Meredith Belbin** reflects on his long learning journey that still continues

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEREMY PEMBREY/PEMBREY STUDIO

Dr Raymond Meredith Belbin originally identified the Team Roles now synonymous with his name while researching teams at Henley Business School during the 1970s.

Belbin grew up in Kent and was educated at the Royal Grammar School in High Wycombe during the disruption of war-torn Britain. He won a place at Clare College, Cambridge where he read classics and was a rowing partner with David Attenborough. It was here he met his first wife, Eunice, who became a major influence on his work and the development of the Team Roles.

While working at the Industrial Training Research Unit and Cranfield, he was invited to carry out research at the Administrative Staff College in Henley-on-Thames, now Henley Business School. Working with Eunice and Bill Hartston (a mathematician and international chess master), Jeanne Fisher (an anthropologist) and Roger Mottram (an occupational psychologist) Belbin began the research project on management teams in action that was to influence training

and developing teams for decades.

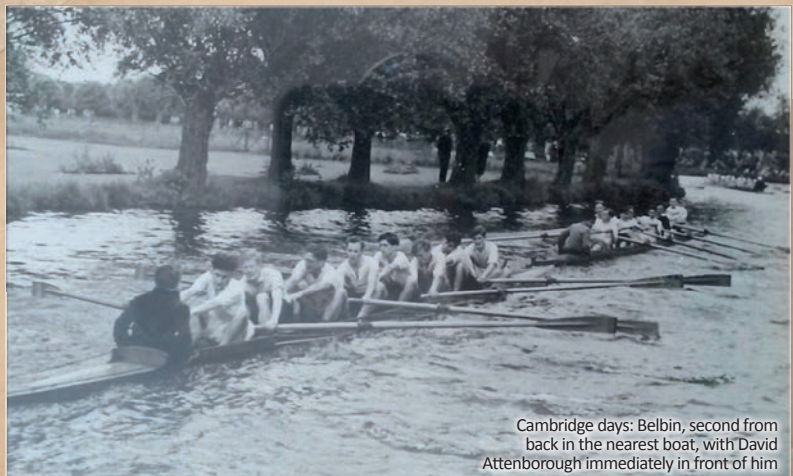
In 1981, Meredith Belbin expounded Team Role theory in his seminal book, *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*. The book was later named as one of the top 50 management books of all time. In 1993, *Team Roles at Work* was published and Belbin continues to write to this day.

At 91 he still takes an active interest in the business, although

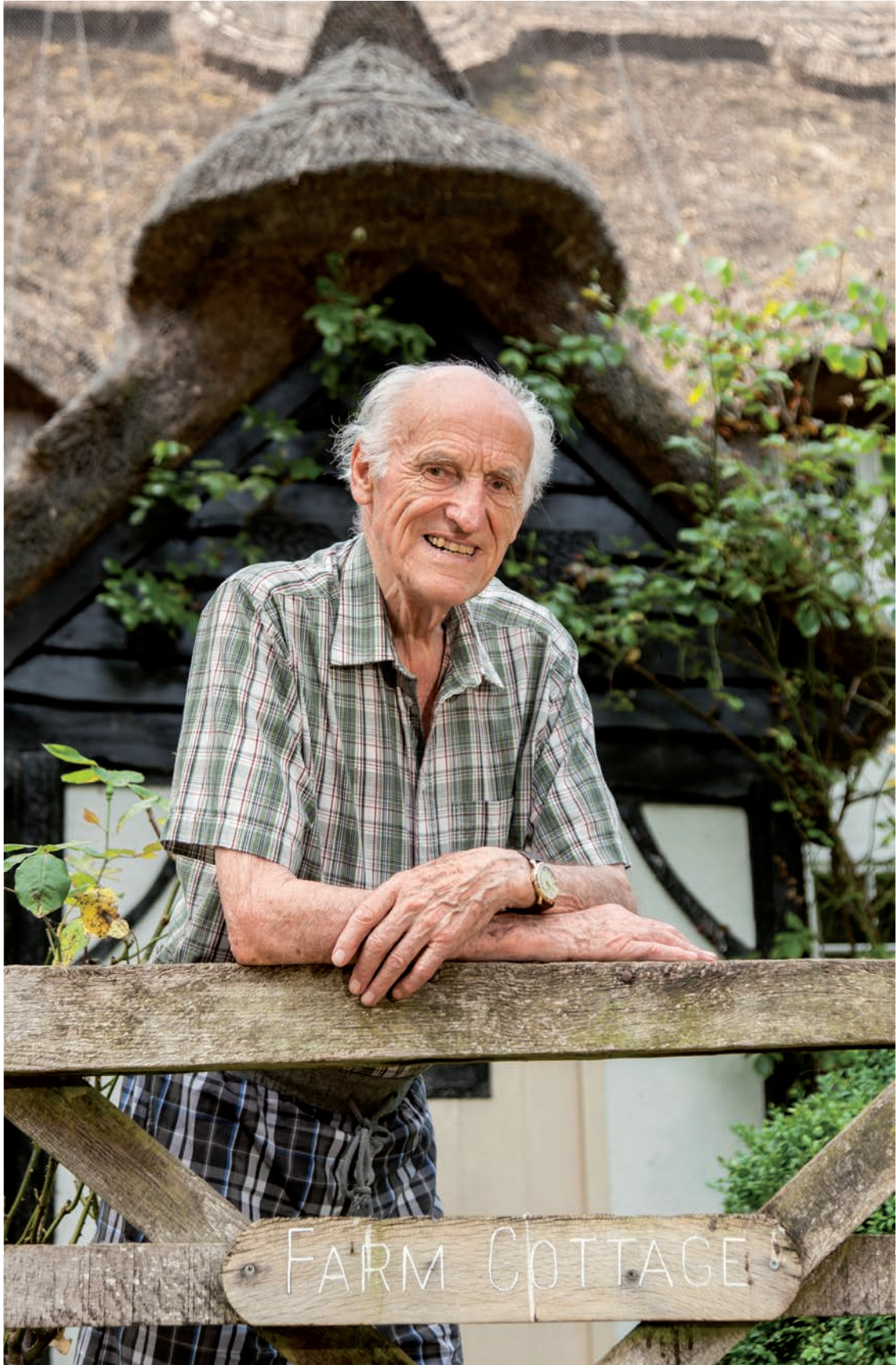
spends his time with his family and caring for his beautiful garden in rural Cambridgeshire.

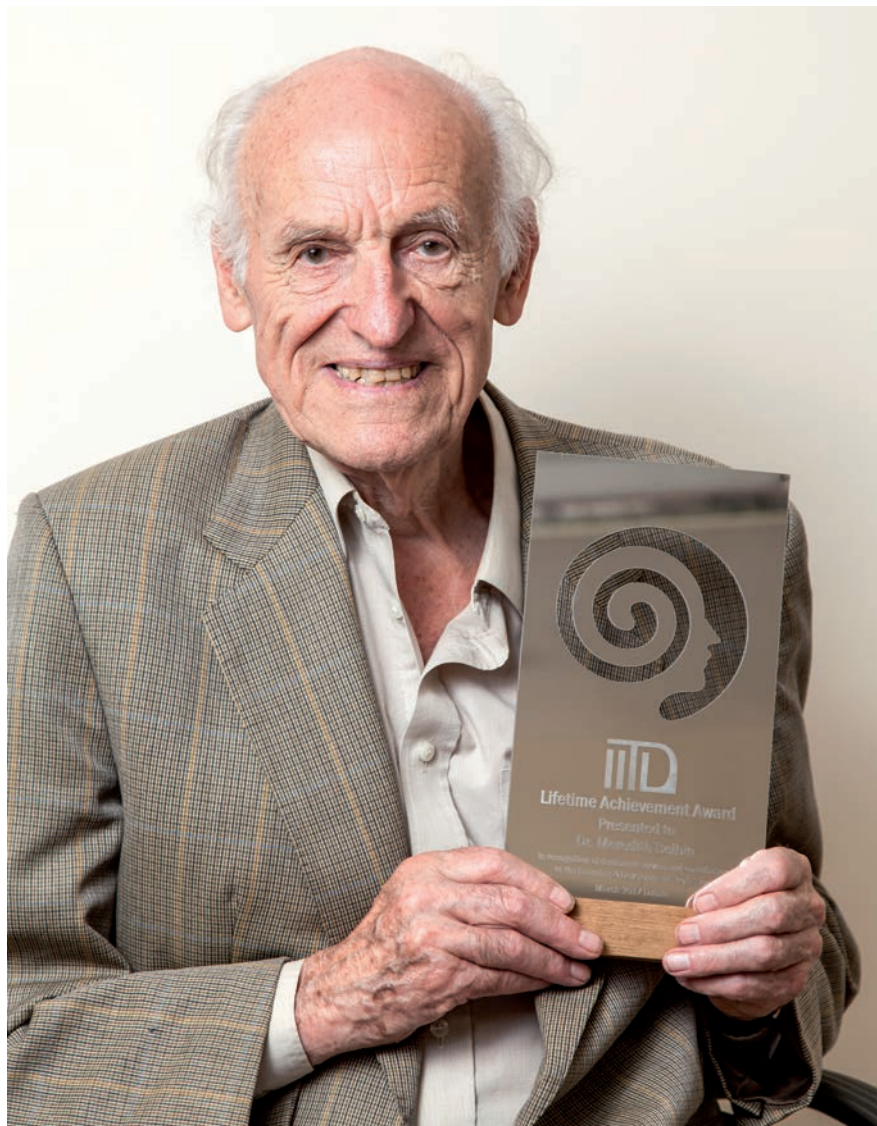
Why training and how did you start?

My doctoral dissertation at Cambridge dealt with the issues of older workers in industry and what happened to them. In the 1950s, they were on the scrapheap once they lost their jobs because they were “too old to learn”. →



Cambridge days: Belbin, second from back in the nearest boat, with David Attenborough immediately in front of him





What we found was that they could be trained satisfactorily for new jobs, providing the training system was changed. That meant taking it more slowly and in stages, and introducing ‘discovery learning’ – setting a series of challenges and allowing older trainees to find their own way forward.

I learned early on in my working life that what often looks impossible could be made to work with the appropriate training. That lesson proved useful later on, when many well-educated people felt unsure how to meet the demands of working life.

Who or what inspires you?

I always respond to the word ‘impossible’. I have heard it uttered many times and always see it as somewhat of a challenge!

When it comes to people, I have been lucky enough to encounter people who brought out the best

in me. My first wife, Eunice (née Fellows), had an amazing career trajectory. Starting work as a secretary in London, she was bombed out of the building in which she studied in her spare time. She took a job teaching typing in Sidcup Technical College and rose to become its acting principal. Entering Cambridge University on the submission of an essay, she took the first part of her degree in anthropology and gained a first and the college prize. We met when she transferred to the psychology department and married shortly after we graduated.

Eunice went on to write a doctoral thesis on learning and training, became director of the Industrial Training Research Unit (making her my boss!) and a member of the Manpower Services Commission, for which work she received an OBE. Eunice and I formed a complementary working

THE 360 DEGREE

“Belbin’s Team Roles, like Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions, have been criticised by those who believe their time has passed. The truth is that both models are timeless and constant and therefore highly reliable. In my work, I combine the two for fabulous team success and creativity in the workplace.”

John Vaughan, Moving Forward Team Ltd

“I discovered last year that Meredith studied at Clare College, Cambridge, with Sir David Attenborough. Like David, Meredith is a giant in his field and long overdue formal honour and recognition for his contribution to business, industry and teams worldwide. He is a man of principles and integrity and always keeps his promise.”

Gary Hewins, Tesco

“Meredith’s work on high performing teams is an iconic backbone for those of us working with teams. I’ve used it for 31 years and watched it bring practical and valuable team and individual insights. As a person, Meredith is a truly remarkable role model for all of us as we get older. He remains engaged and engaging, curious and open and a modern day positive behemoth who has created a huge L&D legacy.”

Isobel Heaton, L&D consultant & director, DTC International

“I have worked with and gained inspiration from Meredith Belbin since the mid 1980s. The impact he has had (worldwide) upon the understanding of human behaviour when in a team situation is incredible. Unassuming and thoroughly approachable, he is, for me, a giant among thought leaders and those responsible for the development of others.”

Alan Marsden, Leeds University Business School

partnership: I came up with ideas and she took care of the business side of things. With my son, Nigel, we founded Belbin and worked together to build the company until her death in 2006.

I also worked with many enterprising colleagues – two I would mention in particular. Tony Caston and I consulted on recruitment and scholarships at ICI, and later worked

for the EU in Brussels, advising how to recruit key staff from member countries for key positions. I also worked with Tony Glaze, who was manpower development director of Cadbury. That role brought into



That experience taught me valuable lessons about how damaging it is when top management becomes separated from line management in a hierarchical structure

focus how best to handle and advance talent once it has been recruited.

What has been your lowest moment, and what your noblest hour?

I have always suffered a blockage with mental arithmetic and only overcame the barrier for entry to Cambridge University by compensating in algebra, geometry and trigonometry. Later, after success in projects to improve quality in industry through statistical quality control, I was invited to contribute to an education course on the subject. My weakness was soon exposed. As a result, I am now reluctant to challenge any change I receive when shopping!

I am always delighted to hear stories of how Team Role theory is making a difference to individuals and within organisations. When I meet those who come to Belbin for accreditation training, it is gratifying to hear how an understanding of team roles has helped them in

their jobs, and enabled them to steer a more suitable career path.

I am also immensely proud of our own high-performing team in Cambridge, who help to spread the Belbin message all over the world.

What and when was your career turning point?

It occurred long ago, when I had the good fortune to be involved with colleagues in long-running experiments at Henley Management College, now part of the University of Reading. Once I knew who was in the team, I had gathered enough information to be able to make a good forecast as to the outcome of a competitive exercise. From this came Team Role theory, and in turn, the Belbin reports, which help individuals to discover their preferred styles and find out how to work more effectively with others. Now in 22 languages, these reports – and Team Role theory – have gained a worldwide reach.



Describe your best learning and development experience

I've never worked for a large company, so I have never experienced formal learning and development, but learned a great deal from organisations through my consultancy work.

In the late 1970s, I worked with John Player & Sons in the tobacco industry. We discovered that the new, fast-running tobacco machines required far less operator attention than did their predecessors and we began to experiment on this premise.

Against my advice, the management decided to keep the experiment secret from the Tobacco Workers' Union and as a result, the TWU called their members on strike, when they discovered what was going on. They marched around the roads of Nottingham, carrying a banner which read: 'The Doctor's Medicine Is Not For Us'. That experience taught me valuable lessons about how damaging it is when top management becomes

IT'S ALL ABOUT ME

Age
91

Education
Clare College, University of Cambridge

Family
My son, Nigel, is the founding and managing partner of Belbin. My second wife, Sheila, and I married in 2008. I have five talented grandchildren

Location
Cambridge, UK

Favourite place
My garden. Open for the last 25 years for charity under the National Garden Scheme, it allows me to be an artist, like my mother, but in this instance by designing with flowers

Favourite book
For sentimental reasons, a leather-bound edition of *Selected Stories* by Rudyard Kipling presented to me as the form prize in 1938. Otherwise, Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* – the first book I read in grammar school. It bewitched me with its unrivalled beauty of English and penetrating insights into social character

Favourite music
Notably, Chopin's nocturnes, etudes, polkas and symphonies, along with the music of Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Dvorak and Vaughan Williams

Favourite film and TV
Casablanca is my all-time favourite film. On TV, I like *Dad's Army*, *Hi-de-Hi* and *Benidorm* – uplifting comedies written by scriptwriters about characters so real they must have been there at the time

Technology
Email, providing my PA reads it first!

PLAYING TO WIN

"There was a celebrated tip to wisdom in the world of Ancient Greece. It was 'know thyself'. It is still true today. In our professional language, we speak of it in terms of 'authenticity'. Do not try to be something you are not. It is a lesson from which politicians could benefit, rather than to aim at pleasing a crowd or echoing the party leader."

separated from line management in a hierarchical structure.

What's next in your career?

I am busy writing a book – my last, I promise! At the age of 91, I am rather more interested in the development of the Cambridge team we have so carefully selected, and in spending time with my grandchildren and in my garden. **TJ**