

FIRST PAST THE POST

Vic Laws' enthusiasm for the hospitality industry – and school catering – remains as undimmed as it was when he first entered the industry more than 50 years ago, he tells Jane Renton



There is something mischievously irrepressible about Vic Laws. A one-man JCB ready to demolish anything smacking of cant or pomposity, he is not the man you necessarily want to have pitted against you in any tender bid that doesn't stand up to his beady-eyed scrutiny. But as anyone who knows him will doubtless tell you, he is also a party animal, a self-confessed dandy and bon-viveur. But there's also a private Vic, one who is stoical in face of adversity. He doesn't suffer fools kindly, yet is given to many acts of selfless kindness – something he tries to conceal – not just towards

friends and colleagues, but also to those whose lives have been more troubled and less privileged. Just ask some of the many prison inmates who have worked with him in the restaurants of The Clink, his favourite charity of which he is an ambassador.

He also shows little sign of hanging up his clogs, though perhaps he is working harder at achieving the work/life balance that eludes so many of us.

"The trouble is I don't really have any hobbies. I eat and drink for a living – in fact the industry is my hobby," he tells me.

This isn't entirely true, dear reader, as

he has recently secured a twentieth-part share in a racehorse, something of an unexpected diversification. But even that decision is not entirely unrelated to hospitality. The enthusiasm for the sport of kings began to take root after a thoroughly enjoyable dinner aboard the Royal Yacht Britannia when he told somebody he had no hobbies and she suggested horse racing which he was already keen on. He then went to the yearling parade at Highclere Stud and quaffing no doubt a few good glasses of champagne, he ended up buying into a racehorse syndicate. Perhaps it

is entirely appropriate as Vic has always been something of a dark horse himself.

But the dark horse was caught off guard with the announcement that we were giving him our 2017 EDUcatering Lifetime Achievement Award for services to education catering, an honour he says that came out of the blue and about which he had "absolutely no inkling of". Like buses, it seems that awards, at least for Vic, tend to come in threes. In 2012 he was awarded an MBE from the Queen at Windsor Castle for services to the hospitality sector, something he describes as "the biggest accolade of my life", followed by a Catey earlier this year and now EDUcatering's top award.

His involvement in the school food industry dates back to the latter part of the 80s, when he set up on his own with his consultancy AVL, which continues to operate in both B&I and school catering, advising and implementing best practice in both private and public sectors.

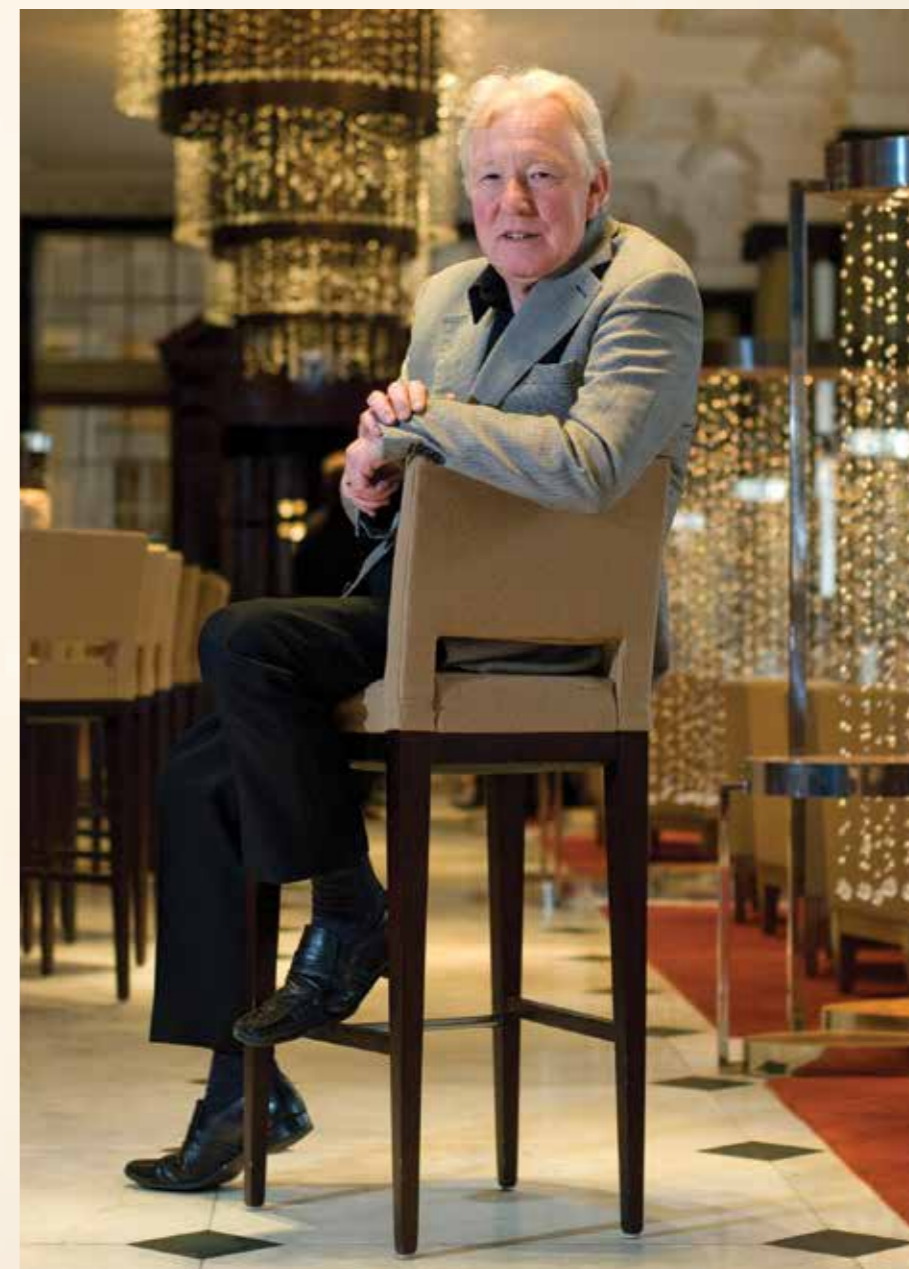
Before consultancy, he had a long and illustrious career working at senior levels for many of the major catering firms, including Trusthouse Forte, GrandMet and Aramark. He was also an early member of LACA and ran its administration for some 17 years.

Being so involved with LACA, Vic does sound a note of caution over the lack of women in senior posts within the hospitality industry, referring to a recent report, *Women in Hospitality*, by fellow consultant Tracey Fairclough of Turpin Smale, which identified that there are 24,000 fewer women in management positions than there were seven years ago. The reverse is true of the school food industry, where women account for some 95% of the workforce and dominate in the most senior industry positions, he says.

There are huge lessons to be learned by the rest of the hospitality industry from the education sector in this regard, he maintains, especially now as labour and skill shortages are beginning to bite as Brexit approaches.

"The very flexibility of the school sector appeals to women, especially those with children to raise. This is reflected in women like Beverley Baker, Lin O'Brien MBE, and Pat Fellows MBE who all had families to raise and yet managed to run spectacularly successful careers alongside," he says.

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For Vic, catering has always been his career of choice. His mother, who he says was "a fantastic cook", encouraged him to cook and bake from an early age. By the time he was 12, he had decided that somehow cooking and eating would form the basis of his future career. He attended a co-educational grammar school where he became the only boy to volunteer for cookery lessons, something that no doubt led to merciless teasing. But Vic didn't mind as there were more than 30 girls in the group.

On leaving school, he applied to go to catering college to train as a chef, but this

was the 50s and the woman who was interviewing him intervened and said, "No, you want to be a manager". In those days chefs weren't considered to be managers.

He embarked instead on a Hotel and Catering Operations course at the Acton Hotel School, now part of the University of West London. However, there was a deliberate interruption on his part after his second year.

"I thought I knew it all by then, so I took myself off to Switzerland to work as a waiter. By this stage I was more interested in being front of house than in the kitchen,

“The very flexibility of the school sector appeals to women, especially those with children to raise”

but in my ignorance I applied to go to Basle thinking that my French was good enough to get by on. The only trouble was they spoke Swiss-German.”

He quickly returned home to finish his course and started work as a trainee manager at the Mount Royal Hotel in London’s Oxford Street. Discouraged by the abysmal pay, he eventually moved into local authority catering by becoming an assistant catering officer for St Albans and later at Coventry, where he was deputy catering superintendent and involved in running 19 restaurants in various public spaces. He then worked for the council in Southend, running a multi-purpose entertainment complex, The Cliffs Pavilion, where pop and jazz concerts were staged along with banqueting and a la carte dining.

On leaving he decided to try something entirely different, taking up a sales job on behalf of Associated Fisheries. It involved selling chicken croquettes, scotch eggs and pork pies as the company wanted to find new custom among institutional caterers. It was not to be his life’s calling.

“I hated every minute of it but it taught me to sell, and also introduced me to hospitals and prisons, particularly in London,” he says.

His next post was more to his taste. He joined Fortes in 1986 to work as a catering manager at Luton airport. He stayed with them for 11 years moving out of passenger catering into in-flight catering, and ending up as director of flight catering for Europe.

He was then headhunted by Grand Metropolitan to run passenger catering in airports in Scotland, as well as at Birmingham and Stansted. His job also involved looking after duty free shops in Mexico in Acapulco, Monterrey and Mérida. It was a fast-paced, jet-set life.

“To get to Mexico I used to leave Heathrow at 4pm on Sunday, fly to Paris, get on Concorde and fly via Washington to Mexico City. We stayed down until Thursday and came back on British Airways via Dallas,” he recalls.

His knowledge of concession catering made him attractive to Aramark, who wanted Vic to help them develop their leisure business. His first task was to help them secure Wembley Stadium, a contract that had been held by the previous



Vic received his MBE in 2012

incumbent for 57 years, but fell to Aramark. He ran their catering and leisure business for two years before falling out with the then chief executive who wanted to combine catering and vending divisions. “In effect I was sacked, and I was furious. It was a first for me. I was also right because many years later they sold the vending business,” says Vic.

But crisis often leads to opportunity; he was quickly headhunted by Spinneys, better known for its extensive array of supermarkets in the Middle East but at that time it had plans to move into UK contract catering, which it wanted Vic to run.

It was a significant move in more ways than one. It was 1984 and the then prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, had begun to

open up organisations such as the NHS, to the private sector.

“It was in effect the inception of outsourcing, the start of facilities management and we were in the vanguard of that,” he recalls.

Vic and his colleagues even went to Whitehall to talk to Norman Fowler, health secretary at the time, and Ken Clarke, who was health minister, to suggest that Spinneys put up capital investment into the services they were providing.

“We were in fact proposing something that was akin to the PFI [Public Finance Initiative],” he adds.

But they were ahead of their time and the offer was rebuffed. Spinneys however secured £36m of new business over 18

months but increasingly turned its sights on the B&I market, where it had no real presence or any real expertise. Vic quickly lost interest and began to look for a new position.

“The only real job I coveted was one where I could run a large contract caterer. I had interviews with lots of senior people but the trouble was no-one wanted to move on and vacate their job so in reality there weren’t many opportunities,” he says.

By accident, or opportunity, he ended up working for himself. He also decided to limit his interest to a small organisation that better reflected his values and beliefs.

“I’d had my fill of working for multinationals making hundreds of people redundant every time they lost a contract,” says Vic.

He also became involved in the Institute of Hospitality, of which he is a former president. He is on the Friend’s Committee of the Royal Academy of Culinary Arts and for the last 30 years has been a conseiller culinaire for the Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, an international organisation of gastronomy. He remains responsible for running its young chef competition, which will culminate in next year’s final in Taiwan.

For a man professing to have few hobbies, his schedule is a full one. He successfully blends retirement into work and work into retirement. He may be a dark horse, one who might even kick down his starting box, but who somehow manages to end up flying first through the finishing post.



Receiving the EDUcatering Lifetime Achievement Award

“The only real job I coveted was one where I could run a large contract caterer”



Vic has a share in a racehorse

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