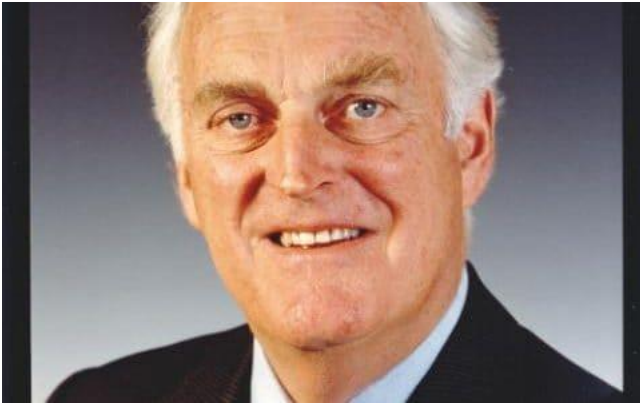


## Sir John Swire, head of family trading empire – obituary



Sir John Swire

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Sir John Swire, who has died aged 89, was chairman and president of his family's Far Eastern trading and aviation empire.

The Swire group traces its origins to Liverpool in 1816, when the first John Swire (1793-1847) established himself as a merchant trading with the United States. Later the Swires turned eastwards to become prominent shipowners and traders in Hong Kong and Shanghai – as well as sugar refiners under the group's Chinese name Taikoo, meaning "great and ancient".

The Second World War brought devastation to the Swire fleet and factories, but the business was rebuilt in the post-war decades by Sir John's father, Jock Swire (1893-1983), a great-grandson of the first John and a formidable entrepreneur who expanded into air transport with a majority stake in the fledgling Cathay Pacific airline and the creation of an aircraft maintenance business in Hong Kong. The group also developed interests across Asia and Australasia in offshore oil and gas services, real estate, hotels, cold storage and Coca-Cola bottling.

John Swire joined what was then called Butterfield & Swire in Hong Kong in 1950. He became a director of the family holding company, John Swire & Sons, in 1955 and succeeded his father as chairman in 1966. His younger brother Adrian (now Sir Adrian) became deputy chairman, and the two worked in close harmony over many years to steer a steady course in changing times while profiting from the emerging strengths of Asian markets.

Following the signing in 1984 of the Sino-British declaration for the handover of Hong Kong in 1997, the Swire group signalled its intention not only to retain a strong presence in the former British colony but to invest expansively in "greater China", which today accounts for 85 per cent of its asset portfolio. The brothers gradually shifted from the dynastic proprietorship of earlier generations to a management model in which the group's key operating companies are managed from Hong Kong and listed on the stock exchange there, but benefit from the long-term stewardship of the family as controlling shareholders. The family also largely succeeded in avoiding media attention, despite a fortune (estimated this year at more than £2 billion) which placed them high in published "rich lists".

It was Adrian who led many of the business initiatives, including the growth of Cathay Pacific as a long-haul carrier and the drive into China, while John maintained a shrewd strategic overview – presiding, as one colleague put it, with “admirable sangfroid during periods of tougher going”. He concerned himself particularly with the “House Staff”, the group’s elite management cadre, originally made up largely of British expatriates but later including Chinese and other nationalities: he interviewed every candidate, set them essays to write, and oversaw recruits’ training and progress up the company ladder.

Modest and restrained in manner – though his temper was volcanic on the rare occasions that he lost it – John Swire was a kindly employer with a good memory for staff family details and a stock of amusing anecdotes that made him a welcome visitor on tours of company operations around the world. He passed the group chairmanship to Adrian in 1987 but remained a director of John Swire & Co until 1997, when he became honorary life president.



Sir John Swire in 2014 on his appointment as a Knight of St John

CREDIT: PICASA

John Anthony Swire was born on February 28 1927, the elder son of John (“Jock”) Kidston Swire and his wife Juliet, who descended from the Barclay and Gurney banking dynasties. At prep school and in his early years at Eton, John suffered meningitis which obliged him to wear leg-irons.

But he recovered to full fitness and was commissioned into the Irish Guards in 1945, serving in Palestine as liaison officer and ADC to the high commissioner, General Sir Andrew Cunningham. After leaving the Army in 1948 – and before going up to University College, Oxford, to read History – he joined a mission to Kalgan (now Zhangjiakou) in north-western China to deliver relief to refugee Mongolian herdsmen driven off their land by Kuomintang soldiery.

His first five years of company life were spent in Hong Kong, Japan and Australia, for which he developed a special affection. Thereafter he was based in London, where he was also sat at various times on the boards of Royal Insurance, the tea trader James Finlay, the Ocean shipping line and the UK arm of the Shell oil group. He was a member of the London advisory committee of HSBC, and a director of its British Bank of the Middle East subsidiary.

He was chairman of the Hong Kong Association, representing wider Hong Kong business interests in London, and the Cook Society, which promotes Anglo-Australian relations. His interests in graduate recruitment and business education led to involvements with Insead, Stanford, Oxford University's appointments board and the University of Kent at Canterbury, where he was deputy pro-chancellor from 1993 to 1999.

Among his philanthropic gifts was a £1 million endowment to University College, Oxford (alma mater of numerous Swires, including Jock), to support postgraduate historians. He also supported the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and Missions to Seamen. A residue of his time in Palestine was a lifelong association with the St John of Jerusalem eye hospital; he was made a knight of the Order of St John in 2014.

Sir John's private pastimes were very much concerned with nature, as an ornithologist, an expert fisherman – he was chairman of the Flyfishers' Club – and a dedicated gardener at his home in Kent, with a special interest in trees. His personal commitment was reflected in Swire investments in environmental projects, and a Swire Institute of Marine Science at Hong Kong University.

John Swire was appointed CBE in 1977 and was knighted in 1990. He married Moira Ducharme in 1961; she survives him with their two sons and a daughter. His younger son Barnaby became chairman of John Swire & Sons in 2015.

### **Sir John Swire, born February 28 1927, died November 28 2016**

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On 6 Dec 2016 David Foley wrote:

John Swire was a gentleman in every sense of the word. He retained a courteous modesty that was in sharp contrast to many of the more colourful but unreservedly less successful tycoons in the aviation and shipping industries, true to his family motto of 'Esse Quam Videri' meaning 'To be, rather than to seem to be'. He managed to harness the loyalty and spirit of a family firm with the economies of scale of a multinational giant without losing a deep respect for his commercial heritage or appetite for innovation. Although I worked as a mere minor supplier to his companies for 25 years and met him on just a few occasions, his character and influence was manifest in every aspect of the Swire Group.

Many reasons have been suggested for the sustained progress of the Swire Group since WWII, but one must surely be John Swire's information network. When visiting his home near Faversham many years ago, I asked him why he had a perch displayed in a case on his wall. He replied: "A perch swims against the current". It was later that evening when my Japanese agent and former Swire Manager Shiro Agawa explained the wisdom of those words. "When others are buying, John Swire is selling and when others are selling, he is buying". Oh, how we could do with that foresight and commercial acuity today in our current negotiations with Europe and the world. David Foley

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2016/12/05/sir-john-swire-head-family-trading-empire-obituary/>