

Matthew Parris
My Week



'Hello Sailor!'

At home with Ted

They do say that if you want to keep a secret you should make a speech in the Commons chamber or publish your autobiography. One such memoir dropped through my letterbox years ago: columnists are

deluged with unsolicited books. During a major sift through the accumulating heap to see what could go to the charity shop, my hand hovered recently over *No Make-Up: Straight Tales from a Queer Life*, by Jeremy Norman (2006). Idly I flicked the pages.

It's a marvellous book. Startlingly candid, unblushingly funny about wealth, privilege and the pursuit of fun, Mr Norman (for ten years a proprietor of *Burke's Peerage* and the founder of the Heaven gay nightclub in London) paints an unforgettable picture of gay life in an age of official prohibition.

But it's his description of Ted Heath that surprises. In a spiky miscellany of vignettes of exotic gay and bisexual men, spies and hedonists, appears a chapter on the late Sir Edward. Norman's interior-designer partner, Derek Frost, had done work at Ted's Salisbury house. The former prime minister (says Norman) kept inventing tiny "after-care service" tasks (like re-stitching two cushions) to ask the couple over or get himself invited to their country cottage. "It was clear to us he was lonely, and looking for an excuse to meet, [and that] in his own inhibited way, he was reaching out to us as a gay couple."

Ted told them he had supported an equal age of consent but "the party rank and file would never have stood for it". Norman concludes: "I couldn't help but conclude that he was a deeply closeted gay man . . . That impression was reinforced by his monosyllabic answers to questions about his love life.

"The last time we saw the old boy was [in 2004] when we called on him at Salisbury . . . He was as hospitable as ever. His housekeeper provided some excellent canapés and he opened a bottle of champagne. A curious and unexplained character greeted us at the front door: a young, educated Oriental man who seemed to be a close friend and confidant. He was clearly not an employee, as he stayed with us during our chat . . . No explanation was sought or proffered as to his place in the household."

Gossip is not always unkind. Like Jeremy Norman I think more affectionately of Ted because of these reflections. They humanise, explain his woodenness, and say something about the injustice that left him with a personal side but one he felt he could not speak about.