Leeming 27 January

We all know that if Matthew Leeming were actually here today - I mean watching secretly behind some buttress – then he would soon find something to provoke him to a long wheezing knee-clutching cackle of sacrilegious laughter.

He would be right, because there is something satirical about the very notion – peddled by some of the papers – that this is some tragic story of talent unfulfilled, because if I know Leeming – and I do – I believe he would so thrilled by this send off that he would be composing the headlines in his head.

Top people mourn Winchester adventurer, and so on. Above all he would have listened to Bijan just now and he would have been chuffed to bits to hear his own record of achievement, as an entrepreneur, writer, man of action, explorer, Wilfred thesiger de nos jours.

And he would be right to be chuffed. I am not going to pretend that every one of his business ventures was crowned with success – and Justin Rushbrooke tells me that there are people here today who are still owed money. Anybody here owed money by Leeming?

OK OK it was in a good cause, and I am here to tell you that the Leeming I knew was absolutely punctilious.

I remember meeting him on Broad street not long after we had both taken finals. And he said, “I feel on top of the world. I feel I could achieve absolutely anything.”

“So do I”, I said.

“What shall we do”? we said.

After a bit of thought we decided to go into business together, making splashback floral kitchen tiles. This was the late 80s epoch of the manic MIRAS fuelled Thatcherite home improvements, and we were sure we would make millions.

I commissioned some designs by my mother – of apples and plums and things – and Allegra contributed some factory space that she happened to have on an estate near Oswestry. It was all going swimmingly until we decided to make use of Michael Heseltine’s government business enterprise advice service and some fellow called Latham absconded with all our money.

But do you know what? Leeming paid us back – I think it was probably Allegra’s money, and I tried to reason with him but he was having nothing of it. He was a gent, and as an entrepreneur he had a touch of genius. Some of you may remember the flat in St Clements, by the Magdalen roundabout, where Leeming’s friends lived in a state of happy torpor.

There it was that Leeming started the St Clement’s college of english, where lots of young European Erasmus students parted with their cash under the impression that they were at an Oxford college, while Leeming raked it in like his hero Augustus Fagan, the great headmaster of llanabba in decline and fall.

He had a fantastic stationery printing business, with very luxurious corrugated paper, and I still have some of the letters he wrote with descriptions of nightlife in whitchurch or the antics of a Balliol arabist he had come across on his travels called Rory Stewart, about whom he expressed quite violent opinions. I think he called him Florence of Arabia.

His political instincts were always extremely sound.

He really did supply most of the aviation fuel in Afghanistan and he really did launch the only operation to bring tourists to Afghanistan, with invitations issued by the tourism minister.

As it happened, the minister was shot the day before the first trip, which discouraged some of his clients, but that didn’t stop Leeming. Yes, he always claimed to be a coward, and I doubt that he was in the XV at Bradfield.

But as he wandered alone amid the bullets and landmines of the hindu kush with sackfuls of dollars to pay the jezzail-toting badmashes for aviation fuel, who among us can doubt that he was every bit as brave as his grandfather John the delphinium breeder who in 1926 landed an avro 585 Gosport on top of Helvellyn.

In fact, he was probably braver. He was also a terrific writer. I was proud to be the editor who carried his first despatches from Afghanistan, including the famous scoop where he lent his mobile phone to the morose pair of suicide bombers who went on to kill Mahsoud the lion of Panjshir, and yes, he and Bijan did write a truly brilliant guide and companion to Afghanistan, with his talent likened to Bruce Chatwin.

And so to all those who say he was cynical and self-destructive I would say yes, but that was because in that English way he understood the vital symmetry between cynicism and romanticism, and that in our culture we need them both, like mustard and ham.

As a theologian he understood that the only reason we used to sit there retching with laughter at Monty Python’s life of Brian – that text he could recite almost by heart – is because we have some vestigial superstition that there must also be something holy about the story it satirises.

He got the key point, that things are only sacred if they can be profaned, and it is only by profaning things, at least in Britain, that we truly exalt them. It was only because he was sometimes such a poltroon that his physical courage was so outstanding. It was only because he was sometimes such an unreliable friend that his bursts of kindness were so remarkable.

It was only by self-deprecation and self-satire that he could deal with his desire to be taken as seriously as he deserved.

I remember once at university we were discussing a Short Walk in the Hindu Kush – or a quick poke in the hindu bush as Leeming called it, and I remembered how Newby and Carless never actually make it up Mir Samir, or whatever was the name of the Afghan mountain they set out to climb – but that wasn’t the point.

The point was the fun of imagining it, the fun of organising it, the fun of trying, and the fun of writing about it, and in all those Leeming excelled. Leeming, hail and farewell.