

Billionaire says there's more to life than work, but family and friends say outsiders shouldn't be surprised - he's always had a compassionate side



● Windows to the soul: with his wealth, John Caudwell could have gone off to be a playboy. But, according to those close to him, he has a sense of integrity that drives his commitment to the family and his charity; below, John with girlfriend Claire Johnson

Gentle John begins his next calling

“JOHN has always said he will work until he's 90, but I think he's realised he's not invincible.”

As partner and mother of John Caudwell's youngest child, Jacobi, Claire Johnson is well-attuned to the thoughts of the 53-year-old founder of The Caudwell Group.

The former model met him five years ago, and says she was swept away by his presence, drive and charisma, rather than his bulging bank balance.

While the 36-year-old admits her man is as driven as when she first met him, the focus of his attention has changed.

“When I first met him five years ago, I would say he was a lot more focused on building the business. That was the challenge to him.

“He was buying new stores and was getting a buzz out of reaching forward to display his success.

“Now he no longer feels he needs to do that.

“Life is precious, and he wants to spend time with his family and his baby, and to find time for himself.

“As he gets older, he is thinking about how many skiing years he's got left, and what he wants to do with his life in terms of travelling.

“He's managed enormous success in his business, and he's simply becoming more interested in achieving more personally.”

Away from work, Claire Johnson says John is now concentrating increasingly on how best to spend his time.

This includes concentrating more effort on The Caudwell Charity, which improves the lives of sick youngsters. The businessman is visibly moved when he meets the children.

Over recent years, he has become more involved in the organisation, and puts on an annual fund-raising ball at his Broughton Hall mansion.

Miss Johnson said John was becoming increasingly passionate about the children he was helping and read a great deal about their condition.

She said: “He is passionate about being able to help these children and cares deeply about the effect that the money can provide in their lives.

“The autism project is even more fulfilling for John because you can see the impact that the charity has.

“John does feel touched by being able to help children and grant a dying wish when they are terminally ill, but it's rewarding when you see the huge difference it makes for these children with autism.”

Miss Johnson believes a holiday to Thailand last year, and a meeting with another businessman, made him fundamentally reassess his priorities.

She says: “We got chatting to this guy who is 10 years younger than John, someone who is successful in business and shares the same interests in skiing and cycling.

“He had this chat and said ‘you know, I don't understand why you don't spend more time doing the things you love’.

“They went rock climbing together, and John is afraid of heights. He loved it, but I think he got to thinking about the fact that life isn't just about how many new stores you open, but your personal achievements and a personal life. I think that struck home because he said later ‘I think I've only got 15 skiing years in me left’.

She adds: “Increasingly, he's been more tired as he gets older, particularly when you get up at 5am and work through until 7pm.

“There are weeks when he has his board meetings, and after that he is now absolutely shattered, absolutely annihilated.

“He likes nothing more than to come home, have his dinner, lie

Billionaire entrepreneur John Caudwell has put the for sale signs up around a mobile phone empire which he has spent 18 years building. But why has the tycoon, famed for his uncompromising and sustained approach to business success, decided to step down and concentrate on his charitable works and personal life? Business editor DAVID ELKS speaks to those closest to him

down on the sofa and watch Coronation Street.”

If and when John does finally sell his business, he plans to fulfil some life-long ambitions such as sailing around the world in a yacht.

But will he be satisfied without the cut and thrust of work?

Miss Johnson says: “The only negative to him selling up is if he gets bored. I have no doubt there will be changes that he has to make, but things are always challenging.

“We're always whizzing around from business dinners to seeing family — John has never been one to sit down and do nothing.

“He has a mother who is 83 who has had a stroke, and my mum had a brain haemorrhage.

“He's spent time with mum trying to get her to walk again. Just to find time to see our families has been difficult, especially when our time is so busy because of business events and dinners that John has to go to. But John always makes time.”

John's eldest daughter, Rebekah, who lives in London, adds that another cornerstone of her dad's drive and commitment to family is a strong sense of ethics.

Without the responsibility to his company, he will be able to bring this side out.

The 27-year-old property developer says: “With his wealth, he could have gone off to be a playboy.

“But he has a sense of integrity that drives his commitment to the family and his charity.

“He didn't see his children perhaps as much as he would have liked, or we would have liked, and now he is in a position where he can step back and do that. Having said that, I'd always find him at the side of my bed in the morning stroking my head to show he cared.”

Over the course of less than two decades, Mr Caudwell, a former Michelin apprentice, established and built one of North Staffordshire's biggest companies, employing 3,500 people in the region.

It has been a rags-to-riches tale with countless reports about the spoils of his wealth: the Jacobean



mansion near Eccleshall, the helicopter, the yacht.

Yet he has also attracted widespread criticism for his brash — often uncompromising business methods — and demanding work ethic. And it is those cynics who suggest Mr Caudwell's desire for recognition, and, ultimately, a knighthood, that led him to set up the Caudwell Charity to help soften his public persona.

But childhood friend, Ray Majer, is quick to point out that Mr Caudwell has changed little since his early days — in private.

He says: “That's rubbish. They don't know him. They see this guy who has been mega-successful, and who in business has had to be hard-nosed to get where he is. But they don't see his softer side.”

The pair met in the senior year of Berry Hill Junior School.

While they were not in the same classes, similar hobbies brought them together, such as scrambling old battered motorbikes across the hills of Berry Hill.

Ray remembers riding over the hills with John in groups of six, with old battered Matchless and AJS bikes, and the times they spent repairing them.

When John left to become an engineering apprentice at Michelin, Ray decided to do the same at British Coal.

But their shared interest remains. Despite the divergence in career paths, they continued to “knock about” together.

Ray admits Mr Caudwell doesn't spend as much time riding his bike

now, yet they still go out for the occasional three hours, with John aboard his Honda SP-1 sportsbike, Ray on his Yamaha FJR1300 tourer.

Ray was best man at Mr Caudwell's wedding to his wife Kate, and is godfather to their 10-year-old son Rufus.

“We weren't old enough to be doing it back then,” he recalls, “but it was a great time, and the motorbikes have become something that we've always shared.”

Even at an early age, a young John displayed a charismatic, yet utterly determined edge — something Caudwell admits was down to being bullied because he had ginger hair.

“He was always very strong-willed and very persuasive. Once he had made his mind up about what he wanted to do, it was done.”

Kate Caudwell, who married the businessman 32 years ago, remembers meeting him when she was 14 years old and being attracted by his straight-talking ambition.

She says: “He said to me as a girl, that by the time he was 40, he would be a millionaire. I'd never heard anything like that before in my life — or since.

She recalls how the couple saw Broughton Hall soon after they were married, and were stunned by its beauty.

Mrs Caudwell, who raised three children with him, Rebekah, Rhannon, and Rufus, during 25 years together, admitted his own high standards could be difficult to live with.

But she retains the “utmost regard” for him, and says that his

personal qualities have always been there.

She is also close to Claire, and the group spend Christmas together as a family.

She says: “It can be difficult because he doesn't suffer fools gladly.” It's not personal. He just sets high standards for himself and expects that of other people.

“I've been married to him for 32 years, although we were together for 25. There are not many ex-wives, and I call myself an ex-wife even though we are not divorced, who would continue to have the relationship we've had.

“If I was on a desert island, I would want to have John with me. He can be warm and caring, and if he says he will do something, I have faith it will get done.” He's not very good at small things like remembering special dates and hugs, but if you have a problem he will go out of this way to help sort it out.

“He can be very compassionate. The charity is only a small part of what he does, and has done, for people.

“People say that he should do more, but that's because a lot of people don't know what he has done.

“There are people who I know, they know, and John knows, who have been helped, but it goes no further than that.”

Another person who has seen the hard-nosed business side of John Caudwell, as well as his personal side, is the Caudwell Group's first employee, Steve Cuthbert.

He joined the business in the early days when Mr Caudwell and his brother Brian, were trying to establish a base for selling mobile phones.

Within a year Mr Cuthbert became a director of the company, and is now a group director and managing director of the mobile phone repair division MPRC, in Newcastle.

He says: “There have been times when I've hated him because it is so tough.”

He accepts charges that the culture of the business can be a hostile environment for those unwilling to listen or understand its goals, remembering 15-hour days for weeks on end.

“We're always totally open about how hard it can be and what is expected of people.

“People say they have the right ambition and desire to succeed, but after a short burst, a lot of people find that they just don't, or can't cope with what is expected.

“During the launch, I personally worked from 8am until 11pm for the next 21 days. There were no breaks, no days off and it was very tough.

“But after 14 days we were in the number one position. BT saw the same opportunity at the same time, but took until May to get into the market. By that time we were already there.

“It's that entrepreneurial approach that John has instilled which got us the high rewards.”

But Mr Cuthbert also saw the softer side of John when his own son was killed in an accident.

He says: “In my own life I've had personal tragedies, and John has always been there. I lost my son in an accident.

“He said ‘what are you doing at work?’ He told me to go away and come back when I was all right. I spent two months off work, but John was always understanding and sympathetic.

“I have also had a couple of health problems, and John has been there. I think John will respect people if they're willing to work hard, and will be there if they need help and time.”

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