

John Pearce, racehorse owner and wartime escapee

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John Pearce, who has died aged 98, became a noted bloodstock breeder and racehorse owner, having successfully escaped from a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in Hong Kong in the Second World War. Hong Kong was Pearce's birthplace, and it remained his home for almost his entire life.

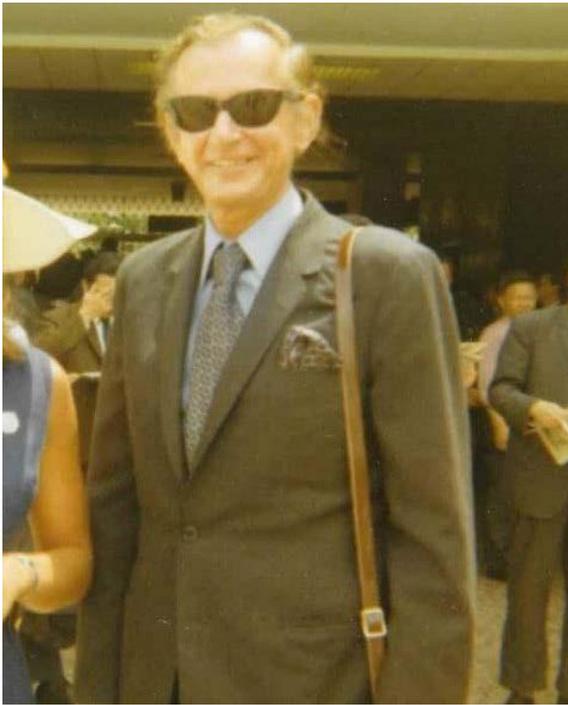
Until the age of 50 – when he retired to concentrate on his racing interests – he was on the board of the trading house Hutchison International, in which his father, Thomas (Tam), had acquired a controlling share in 1917. For 40 years, until he was in his nineties, John Pearce lived in some splendour in a suite at Hong Kong's Mandarin Oriental hotel.

Pearce would visit Britain annually for a couple of months during the flat racing season, basing himself in his flat at the Jockey Club in Newmarket. Racing was his lifelong passion (he had bought his first share in a horse at 17), and his chief ambition was to breed and run, in his own blue and white colours, a winner of the Derby.

He never did, but came tantalisingly close: in 2006 his horse Dragon Dancer, a 66-1 shot which had never won a race, failed by only a short head to hold off Sir Percy. Afterwards Pearce said ruefully: "I would rather have come last than second." Dragon Dancer later finished fourth in the Irish Derby and second in a Group 2 race in France, before finally breaking his duck in a race at Windsor the following season.

There was further disappointment in 2012, when Pearce was 94. At the yearling sales the Earl of Huntingdon, acting on Pearce's behalf, was the under-bidder at 500,000 guineas for Australia, which would win the Derby two years later.

Pearce, who for more than 30 years boarded his mares at Kirsten Rausing's Lanwades and Staffordstown studs, also bred Arcadian Heights – trained, like Dragon Dancer, by Geoff Wragg – which won the Ascot Gold Cup in 1994 and then followed up in the Doncaster Cup. The horse was a "character" and had to race in a muzzle, having bitten off a finger from David Loder when he was an assistant to Geoff Wragg.



John Leitch Colmere Pearce was born on October 13 1918 into a family with a long connection with the Far East. His grandfather, the Rev Thomas William Pearce, had spent nearly 50 years in China as a missionary and translator, while his father Tam had been a prominent figure in the Hong Kong business community since 1903.

Sent to school at Charterhouse, John spent the holidays with his parents' friends, the Johnstones, in Dumfriesshire. John Johnstone was a trainer, and it was there that John's love of racing was nurtured.

In the mid-1930s he returned to Hong Kong to join Hutchison. But on Christmas Day 1941 Hong Kong surrendered to the Japanese after 18 days' fierce fighting during which Tam Pearce was killed in action. John had joined the Royal Artillery, and was manning the anti-aircraft guns near Deepwater Bay.

After the surrender Pearce was incarcerated in Sham Shui Po camp, from where in April 1942, with three comrades (Douglas Clague, Lynton White and David Bosanquet), he escaped through a sewage tunnel. This was despite the opposition of their senior officers, who feared reprisals by their Japanese captors. According to Tony Banham, in his book *We Shall Suffer There: Hong Kong's Defenders Imprisoned, 1942-45*: "Having found a manhole cover in a weed covered corner of Sham Shui Po, they had attempted escape in March but were disturbed. By early April the tide and moon suited their purposes again, and aided by various diversions they escaped through a sewer to the sea."

Apparently with the aid of a lilo, the four men then swam across the bay into Chinese territory. Equipped with only a sketch map and tinned food, they eventually ran into some guerrillas who helped them negotiate their way to Huizhou, from where they progressed to Chungking. In all they had made a journey of more than 600 miles.

Pearce re-joined the war effort as an intelligence officer with the British Army Aid Group (BAAG), an MI9 unit assisting PoWs to escape from Japanese camps. Douglas Clague (who was later knighted and became chairman of Hutchison International) also joined BAAG. Major Pearce drew up an evasion map which was issued to all air forces operating in the Pacific, and was appointed MBE for his intelligence work.

After the war he returned to Hutchison, remaining on the board until his retirement in 1968. He was subsequently an astute investor in the Asian markets. Hutchison was sold in 1979 to Li Ka-shing, now said to be Hong Kong's richest man.

A steward of the Hong Kong Jockey Club, Pearce was a regular at Sha Tin racecourse, often presenting the Pearce Memorial Cup for the winner of a race run in memory of his father. Towards the end of his life he also had a house at Gassin, near St Tropez. In his latter years his runners were trained by Ed Walker and Sir Mark Prescott, and in 2016 he had 13 winners.

John Pearce was known for his courtesy, generosity and straight dealing. He once declined an invitation to join the Queen in her box at Royal Ascot because he had already agreed to meet a friend for tea. He embraced new technology, in his nineties delighting in the possibilities offered by an iPad, Skype and his iPhone6.

He was unmarried, and is survived by his niece, Daphne Bush.

John Pearce, born October 13 1918, died January 12 2017