

RICHARD BRANSON

The Inside Story

MICK BROWN

Chapter 1 Childhood

Richard Charles Nicholas Branson was born on 18th July 1950. His birth was extremely difficult, as he was more than three weeks overdue and the hospital in which he was born believed in natural childbirth methods; no drips, forceps or painkillers. His mother, Eve Branson, later commented, *"Richard came into the world an absolute handful. And he has been a handful ever since."*

Richard Branson's father, Edward, was a third generation lawyer. The Branson's had a proud tradition of producing some of the finest legal minds in the region. The family were upper middle class in British society, although in reality they were not terribly well off financially.

His mother, Eve Huntley-Flindt, had been an air stewardess on some of the first commercial flights between Europe and West Africa (an early service using converted Lancaster bombers requiring passengers and crew to wear oxygen masks while in flight). Eve was strong-minded, rather entrepreneurial and fiercely independent. She was determined to instill these same qualities in each of her three children.

The Branson family code was; "Have faith in yourself; nothing is impossible, but the only person likely to make anything happen is you."

Richard Branson spent his childhood in activity. He showed no interest in books, and television was forbidden at home as a waste of time watching what others had achieved. It was considered far better to be out doing things for oneself. His parents went out of their way to set him challenging activities, such as learning to swim, walking across fields at night by himself, and a number of similar activities designed to build character. They later came to regret the success of this

process as Richard grew up high-spirited, self-reliant and totally mischievous.

When sent to a private junior school, Richard made friends with a lad named Nikolas Powell. They soon became the closest and most constant of friends. At school, Richard produced abysmal results in the classroom, but he took to competitive sports with flair. By the time he was at preparatory school, he was the captain of the school rugby, cricket and football teams. His blithe indifference to school studies meant he became a regular visitor to the Principal's office where he was urged to put more effort into his studies.

At age 11, Richard suffered a torn ligament in a soccer match and some weeks later, the cartilage in his knee was removed which effectively ended his sporting ambitions. One of his school mates later said of Richard, *"He was very assertive and pushy. He had this attitude that anything was possible, and if it's not possible, why not? If there was any conspiracy afoot, it was likely that Richard was at the heart of it."*

He was sent to a 'cramming' school in order to try and pass his looming Common Entrance exams. However, while there, he became rather friendly with the headmaster's eighteen year old daughter, and ended up spending each night climbing down the drainpipe outside his dormitory window to visit the girl. When caught, he was promptly expelled from school. His response to this was to draft a bogus suicide note, and having left the note with someone who was sure to read it immediately, set off to the nearest cliffs. He walked slowly enough to enable the persuading group to catch up, and the next day he was reinstated and caned soundly. However, despite these events, he passed his Common Entrance exams with above average marks, and was sent off to Stowe School, a public school.

Chapter 2 Stowe

Richard distinguished himself at Stowe by showing not the slightest interest in the established social order. *"If he got into trouble, it wasn't because he was making a radical statement against the system, but because he simply wasn't interested in doing what was demanded of him. He was only interested in doing what he wanted to do, and if he could inveigle other people into doing it, so much the better; if he couldn't, too bad,"* said Tim Albery.

Richard had no interest in learning or awareness of fashion. He did not have a clue whether he was conforming or bucking fashion trends. Rather he had an enthusiasm for life, and boundless energy combined with an insatiable appetite for practical jokes. He was still accident-prone, and broke numerous bones including his pelvis when aged fourteen.

Whenever Richard Branson and Nik Powell got together at holiday time, they started a series of money-making schemes including planting Christmas trees (eaten away by wild rabbits when small) and breeding budgerigars (worked so well they ran out of cages). They also spent time admiring the local girls. Nik Powell later said, *"Richard never had any problems meeting girls. Other boys would hold back at parties and look at girls wistfully; Richard would always just barge straight up to them. He was certainly very keen to be the first person on the block to have sex."*

While at Stowe, Richard and Jonathon Holland-Gems came up with a great idea - they wanted to start an inter-school magazine to be called *Student*. Richard decided to solicit articles for the magazine, and after obtaining a copy of *Who's Who* from the school library, he began writing to every person listed asking for an interview, an article, a donation or whatever. The headmaster of Stowe became alarmed when he discovered that within a short time, Branson had organized any and almost every boy in his house room copying letters and licking stamps.

Typical of Richard at this time, he had also put his name down for a school prize for the best idea for an adventure holiday. He went to the school and said that since he was busy with *Student* magazine, would it be alright if his girlfriend could enter the contest on his behalf. This idea was turned down (much to Richard's chagrin), but it typified his direct, unabashed approach to any opportunity that presented itself.

The replies from his letter writing campaign started to flow in. Edward Heath, Bryan Forbes, Peter Sellers and scores of others sent letters of support, contributions and articles. Richard read them all, culling out those he thought 'too boring' no matter what reputation the writer had. *Student* was turning out to be an excellent and indispensable education in the real world. Richard Branson now had visions of a career as a journalist, and *Student* took on a more important note. He wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the President of the United States asking whether they would like to contribute a short message to the young of today.

Finally, at the age of 16, Richard announced to his parents that he was leaving Stowe to run *Student* on a full-time basis. They were naturally mortified, and strongly suggested he gain an education before embarking on a business career. Richard approached his headmaster and suggested that he would stay on at Stowe if he would allow him to install a telephone in his study. *"He wanted it to run the magazine, and he couldn't do that from the public telephone box,"* said Mr Drayson. *"I said that wouldn't be easy, so he said in that case he was afraid he would have to leave."*

It took nearly a year to talk his parents into letting him leave school. His academic progress was faltering, with most teachers noting that his only interest in their course had been to criticize it. Richard remained adamant that he would make his mark on the world with *Student*. His teachers suggested

the regeneration of Britain could wait for Richard to first secure a proper education. His parents finally relented and in the summer of 1967, Richard left Stowe. *"Branson,"* said his headmaster on the day he left, *"I predict you will either go to prison or become a millionaire."*

Chapter 3 Student

The first issue of *Student* appeared in January 1968. It included an impressive collection of articles from Vanessa Redgrave, Gavin Maxwell, Henry Moore, David Hockney and a number of other distinguished people. The cover featured a drawing by Peter Blake, the artist who produced the cover for the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper* album. Of course, none of the contributors were paid.

Branson and Jonathon Holland-Gems worked from the basement of Jonathon's parent's house in London. This consisted of a single room with a rickety wooden table, a selection of mattresses on the floor, endless piles of paper, a mound of unwashed coffee cups and plates, and the remnants of whatever food they could pilfer in nocturnal raids on Mrs Holland-Gem's kitchen upstairs. Most essentially, the room also had a telephone, and Richard quickly sold more than £6,000 of advertising.

Awkward in person, Richard was transformed on the phone. Many of the advertisers would have been astonished to learn they were talking to a seventeen year-old with a real acne problem. Over the phone, Richard came across as professional, purposeful and responsible. For example, he arranged a printing contract with Waterlows for 60,000 copies of *Student*, with three months credit. When they discovered his age and the fact that he was under the legal age to sign the contract, they demanded a guarantor. However, Richard suggested if they did not print, their reputation would be damaged as he had a written contract. They eventually decided to go ahead and print his magazine.

Distribution of the magazine was never a strong point. In addition to a network of contacts in colleges and universities throughout the country, Richard also tried enlisting the help of London's 'alternative' society - the long haired, blue jeans wearing trendies. They would turn up at the door of their office for heaps of magazines to sell on the streets. Sometimes they would return with the agreed 50-percent of the proceeds, but more often they would never be seen again.

Numerous old friends turned up to help, including Nik Powell. Before long, there were a large group of people camped in the basement offices of *Student*. There was a general feeling of squalor and filth, the raids on the upstairs kitchen became very regular and the nocturnal comings and goings became too much to bear. *Student* magazine was given notice to quit the basement by Mr Holland-Gems. Fortunately, Richard's parents had leased a house in Albion Road as their London base, and Richard prevailed on them to let him use it for *Student* magazine. With the move, the numbers of helpers swelled and by issue 3, the magazine boasted a bigger staff than most national newspapers.

The word staff was actually deceiving, as nobody was actually being paid. The people were simply there for the excitement and the thrill of being involved. They were inspired by some indefinable idea that they were working for the greater good, and having fun to boot. Branson always had the ability to know what people were thinking, and he often used to take the entire group out on treats to keep morale high.

Branson's skills as a deal-maker were also flourishing. He approached established newspapers to finance sending his journalists to foreign countries with the promise of articles. He always managed to sell enough advertising to keep the magazine afloat. He became well known as a publisher extraordinaire. This image was carefully cultivated - for example, whenever he was being interviewed, someone

