

### From the Obituary for Nicholas Saunders

by Nicholas Albery for the *London Guardian*,  
February 5th 1998

NICHOLAS SAUNDERS, who died in a car accident in South Africa, aged 60, was an alternative entrepreneur of genius, who wrote the first *Alternative London* guides, transformed Neal's Yard in Covent Garden into an oasis of greenery and alternative businesses and became renowned in the media as the guru for the drug Ecstasy, running the [www.ecstasy.org](http://www.ecstasy.org) research site on the Internet which receives about 3 million accesses a year. Saunders—whose father Sir Alexander Carr-Saunders was director of the LSE—was always himself a rebel. He tried to blow up his school chapel at Ampleforth—although he was quite relieved when the bomb failed to go off; and he dropped out from his engineering course at Imperial College—his insistence on working everything out from first principles did not fit the system.

He was a squatter before the seventies fashion for this. For three years in the sixties he squatted a disused house in Chelsea, hidden behind hoardings, along with five geese and a fairyland garden, part of which he flooded. His mother gave him money for a mortgage to encourage him away from this life-style, but he stayed put and used the money to start developing and selling a series of flats. This provided the capital, in 1970, for printing 50,000 copies of his first and very successful *Alternative London* guidebook, which he distributed himself, for instance using sellers in the park buying carrier bags of books from him at half price. Saunders believed that he was the first to use the phrase "alternative society" and the book distilled his tips on everything from drain repair in squats to hitching to the East.

He moved into an old warehouse in the very derelict Neal's Yard in Covent Garden and opened downstairs the first wholefood warehouse in London that sold medium bulk to the public. He was proud that their turnover per square foot exceeded Sainsbury's. The most popular items sold there led him to found a series of other shops in the Yard, ranging from the Neal's Yard Coffee House and Neal's Yard Bakery to the Neal's Yard Dairy and the Neal's Yard Apothecary. He created over 100 jobs without government aid of any kind and without any of the businesses failing. He

had a belief derived from a Gurdjieff group he once belonged to, that fulfillment comes from work which is demanding, so long as it gives opportunity for variety, learning and responsibility. So rather than have a machine hoist, workers hoisted bags of grains and beans up to the first floor packing room by jumping out of the window holding the pulley rope. There was only one minor accident in 10,000 jumps.

With the computer revolution Saunders went high tech, opening the first "laundrette" for desktop publishing, the Neal's Yard DTP Studio.

Taking the drug MDMA (Ecstasy) in 1988 made Saunders realise that he had been mildly depressed for ten years, and he set about uncover-

ing every piece of research on this drug; believing that adults, if sufficiently informed, should be free to make their own decisions about drugtaking, whilst hoping that ravers

would realise through his work that the drug was more than a dance drug and had potential as a tool in therapy, marriage guidance, painting and spiritual exploration.

He organised group experiments, such as one where artists drew portraits in a group without the drug and then again under the influence of MDMA—with the drug drawings gaining in emotional intensity at the expense of disciplined polish. He self-published his findings in the book *E for Ecstasy* (1993), which sold 20,000 copies a year, and followed this up with *Ecstasy Reconsidered* (1997), for which he commissioned a survey of the research on the drug's potential neurotoxicity. On his website [www.ecstasy.org](http://www.ecstasy.org) he published regular photos of the various Ecstasy pills on the market, with warnings as to their actual constituents.

At the time of his death, he was finalising research for a book on drugs and spirituality, having visited a number of tribes around the world who use natural drugs ranging from ibogaine to ayahuasca as their communion ritual. He leaves behind not only his co-researcher and partner, Anja Dashwood, and Kristoffer, his 19 year old son, but a host of grieving friends around the world who have set up a web site for stories of his life at [www.stain.org/nicholas/](http://www.stain.org/nicholas/). Nicholas Saunders, alternative entrepreneur, born January 25th 1938; died February 3rd 1998. •

### Message from Anja, Nicholas Saunders' partner

posted at [www.stain.org/nicholas/](http://www.stain.org/nicholas/)

ON THE 3RD of February 1998, Nicholas Saunders, my true love died near Kroonstad, in Free State in South Afrika. I was told he was engaged in an inspiring conversation at the time the car accident took place. The car skidded off the road and tumbled down at a beautiful place with trees and water. He died quickly and at peace. Free State has a lot of big farmland areas, mainly wheat. The predominant colouring of the flowers is yellow and mauve and there are many sunflowers. The skies are huge. Nelson Mandela wrote about it: "When I visit there, nothing can shut me in. My heart can roam as far as the horizons."

I would like to think that his spirit soared out there in the vastness of space. Last year we had an LSD trip together which he described as a "peak" experience. A spiritual experience in which he felt: "I was able to let go completely, like never before and the result was to allow my "essence" to flow out and rejoin its source. It was like "coming home," but far more so. It was incredibly "right" and joyful, and I wept for joy." I trust that his last trip was the greatest of all!

May our love flow forever.

Anja