

Tribute to Ken Walker

Ken was born on the 10th of April, 1930, in Pudsey, Yorkshire, the long hoped-for only child of Doris and Arnold Walker. In the years leading up to the outbreak of World War II, he attended Waterloo Junior School where he won a scholarship to Pudsey Grammar School.

A Methodist from his earliest years, Ken soon formed a close knit group of friends at Pudsey's Richardshaw Lane Primitive Methodist Chapel. As Stewart, his life-long friend and best man, recently recalled, "I have the happiest memories of our times at school, church, and family holidays, particularly during the war years when we were growing up together."

As a boy, Ken fell in love with cricket, playing regularly for his school team and, for a time, in the 2nd Division of the Bradford League at a very young age. After taking the school certificate, he completed the Civil Service exam and started work as a clerical officer at the Bradford Labour Exchange, during which time he played cricket for his church in the Sunday School League as a medium fast bowler.

In his most memorable match, Ken took six wickets in a single over, a remarkable accomplishment in cricket at any level. This feat earned him a report and photograph in the Yorkshire Evening Post, and to commemorate the occasion, his club presented him with the ball mounted on an engraved cup.

But in typical Ken fashion, whenever he recalled his moment of triumph, he never neglected to mention that the opening batsman, who had stood fuming at the bowlers end as he watched the wickets tumble, smashed him for a pair of sixes in his very next over, and thus his dreams of a Yorkshire call up were dashed.

After passing the Civil Service Executive Officer exam, Ken was appointed to the Board of Trade in London, but a few weeks later he was called up for National Service by the RAF. After basic training, he was promoted to Pilot Officer and posted to Hamburg. As he drove around northern Germany inspecting RAF stations, he often joked that he was “occupying West Germany.”

Back home, on his demob leave, he spied a certain young lady in the local cinema, and during a “chance encounter” in Pudsey Park the very next day, he asked her out.

I could say the rest is history, but it turns out he needed a little more convincing. After a few weeks’ courting, he was talking to Betty’s brother Stanley, a lifelong member of Yorkshire Cricket Club, about the day’s play at Headingley, saying, “Johnny Wardle didn’t do very well today, did he?” To which Betty immediately replied, “Well, it was hardly his sort of wicket, was it?”

As Ken later confessed, that was the moment he knew. “She’s the girl for me!”

Unable to settle after returning to the Board of Trade in London, Ken applied for a place on a two-year post-service course at Westminster College to train as a teacher, during which time his long-distance romance with Betty blossomed, with many love letters and the occasional visit. Once qualified, Ken returned to Yorkshire and took a position as junior teacher in French, English, and Latin at Woodhouse Grove, a Methodist Boarding School for boys.

In 1956, Ken and Betty were married. They bought their first home in Calverley, near Pudsey, settling down to raise a family – Catherine, Michael and Andrew – and soon became enthusiastically involved in church life at Calverley Methodists, where among various responsibilities, Ken was appointed Sunday School Superintendent.

Ken’s growing passion for teaching led him to obtain a degree in French and English by correspondence course, studying late into the evening after Catherine had been put to bed. This allowed him to take a job at Carlton High School in Bradford, where he became Head of French and developed an interest in the latest innovations in teaching French and other languages.

In 1970, Ken became a lecturer in Modern Languages at Jordanhill Teacher Training College in Glasgow, where he could pursue his new interests, with a focus on training teachers how to use the newly developed language labs to provide a more interactive learning experience for their students.

Having a language teacher for a father did come with the occasional disadvantage. Woe betide any of us who used the word “less” when it should have been “fewer” – a lesson all too familiar to Ken’s grandchildren as their parents carry on this pedantic (and frankly rather annoying) tradition.

Anniesland Methodist Church was our new church home in Glasgow, with Ken and Betty soon volunteering to take on a variety of leadership roles, and often “volunteering” us children to help with the washing up after tea and biscuits, and their regular slot on the cleaning rota. But we had many happy times there nonetheless, including the day when Catherine married her husband, Brian.

We have many fond memories of our summer holidays together with Dad, whether in windswept Blackpool, a caravan or holiday cottage in a remote part of Scotland, or a week at one of the Methodist Guild Holiday homes around the country. However, our luck with the weather was so famously bad, other families started saying they would avoid taking their holidays at the same time as us!

In the mid-80s, as the school population declined, early retirement became an option. Dad accepted the offer, but felt too young to retire, so he said to Mum, “Whatever we do next, we should do it together.” The result of this conversation was Abberley, their Bed and Breakfast in the heart of Stratford-upon-Avon. Once the house was ready and the necessary paperwork complete, they placed a “Vacancies” sign in the front window, and were open for business.

A few days later, a rather frail elderly gentleman booked in, having arrived by bus from a village half-an-hour’s drive north of Stratford. When it was time for their guest to leave, they realised it was Sunday, and there were no buses running. The poor man looked so dejected that Ken, without hesitation, offered to take him all the way home by car. Upon his return, Ken turned to Betty and said, “Goodness, is this what running a Bed and Breakfast is going to be like?”

For over a decade they opened their home to guests from all around the world, making many friendships that endure to this day. Ken always helped people with their luggage, and he particularly enjoyed being “front of house” at breakfast time, dressed in collar and tie while serving breakfasts featuring Barry the Butcher’s sausages and homemade marmalade. Little wonder Abberley was one of the few properties in all of Stratford to be awarded “Highly Commended” by the English Tourist Board.

Once again, the local Methodist church became a central part of their lives, and very soon they found themselves immersed in church life when Ken was invited to be a steward. Not long after, he and Barbara Haggett introduced the first after-service coffee, and with the rest of the stewards they set up the church’s first coffee rota.

He became a founder member of the church’s Green group, and was enthusiastic about encouraging environmental awareness through recycling and energy conservation. On Sunday mornings, he loved reading the lesson and being on door duty, always on the lookout for new people to welcome. He had a gift for putting people at their ease.

It is fitting, therefore, that we are here today to remember Ken where he and Betty made so many friends and found such a welcoming community.

Having been involved in drama throughout his life, Ken loved the theatre. For many years Mum and Dad barely missed a single Shakespeare production at the RSC, and they greatly enjoyed taking part in Ivy and Charles’ plays and special readings. The love of literature he shared with Mum led them to become founder members of the Albany Road Book Club where they spent many happy hours discussing books over savoury snacks and red wine. They were especially touched when, right in the middle of lockdown, all their neighbours turned out to wish Ken a very special 90th birthday.

The family was always important to Dad, and he leaves us with many happy memories of the times we spent together as the family grew – Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries, weekend trips, and holidays. He warmly welcomed Brian and Alice into the fold, and took much interest and joy in the lives and successes of his grandchildren Ian, Paul, Helen, Gabby, and Rosie. And in recent years, it was Dee, Harsha, and Owen’s turn to be welcomed with open arms into the family, and soon Dad was the proud great-grandfather of Ollie, Nina, Ella, and Theo.

For many years, Ken and Betty enjoyed a spring holiday with their son Michael in the city of Austin amidst the profusion of wildflowers in Central Texas, and had many an off-season break in the warmer climes of southern Europe. But as time went on Ken had the desire to travel further afield, and organised trips to the Canadian Rockies, South Africa, Egypt, Russia, Australia, and China.

There was one place Ken really wanted to visit, but alas, he never made it. That was Machu Picchu, high in the Peruvian Andes. Regardless of this disappointment and because of his love of travel and new experiences, he never failed to urge young people, his grandchildren especially, to travel as soon and as often as possible, with one proviso – if they ever visited Machu Picchu, they were not allowed to talk about it in his presence. Fortunately, that didn't stop them going, and it certainly didn't stop them from telling him all about their trip!

And so, as we bid our final farewell to Ken, we remember him as a good friend, never slow with a warm welcome, a kind word, or a helping hand. We remember his love for telling stories – many of which I'm sure are very familiar to you – his love of company, his easy manner, his genuine interest in the lives of others, and a sense of humour that could bring a smile, a laugh, or a groan to anyone listening.

We remember him as the loving Dad to Catherine, Michael, and Andrew. Our Dad. Ahead of his time, a dedicated hands-on dad, fully involved in our upbringing and an enduring source of comfort, support, and quiet encouragement as we found our own paths through life.

We remember him as a loving grandad and great-grandad, his interest in the lives of his grandchildren and great grandchildren, his support and encouragement in all they do.

We remember him as the devoted husband to Betty. 66 years of constant companionship. A true partnership of the deepest care, love and affection.

We have been reminded of all this and more by the many kind tributes we have received from friends old and new, near and far. For which, we thank you.

And, finally, from all the family to Mum, and especially to Dad on this day, our deepest gratitude for the life, the support and the unconditional love they have given to us all.