

Tribute

Andy Beck was born in the town of Grimma, near Leipzig in what later became East Germany, on 23rd October 1944. His mum Veronika was of dual nationality, British-German and she never spoke to Andy of his father. Life was very hard for Veronika and her son, but she was fortunate to get to Berlin before it was blockaded, and they lived through the subsequent air-lift by the British and American forces. Veronika was very enterprising and secured a job with the BBC as a translator and they both moved to live in London. Andy rarely spoke of his difficult early life.

Veronika met and married Douglas Fitch who adopted Andy and they lived in Carshalton in Surrey where Andy spent a year at primary school, failed his eleven plus and thus continued to Wallington Secondary Modern School. He loved sports and maths and was of course a very intelligent boy who went on to Wallington County Grammar for the sixth form where he studied maths and economics. Very sadly his mum died when Andy was in the sixth form and by the time Andy got a place at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, to study economics, his adoptive father Douglas became distant and expected Andy to fend for himself.

Barry Cook, Bas, met Andy in Cambridge in 1964 when they arrived at the same college. Barry talks of Andy as always being 'his own man' and with his South London accent, often stuck out from the 'posh boys'. The custom was for the freshmen to take sherry with the Master of the College, but Andy duly declined the invitation. When summoned by his moral tutor to give an explanation, Andy cited personal freedom of choice, not wanting to show disrespect to the Master by wearing the only clothes he had, which were jeans. He did however regale this story to his fellow students with his customary deadpan humour and a barely detectable smile.

Andy was a great athlete, a middle distance and cross-country runner, a bit of a footballer and a great swimmer, which was a leisure activity he adored throughout his life. As a young man Andy apparently did like his beer although when he was in training he wouldn't touch a drop. Barry recalls that sometimes Andy would just decide that he wasn't in training, and the normally serious, quietly spoken, rational, logical Andy would be transformed into a louder, far more animated and very funny Andy who could mimic the characters in their college life such as the obsequious porter, his landlady Mrs Benson, or other students with their plummy, hearty voices.

Following in his mother's footsteps for ingenuity, Andy used to take jobs at Butlin's during the holidays, in order to get free board and accommodation: as a waiter Andy had to work long hours always ending the day with a good scrub of the floor in the dining hall. Barry accompanied him on one occasion, to the holiday camp in Bognor Regis, not necessarily for the B and B but in the hope of meeting young women, which one night he did. However, on going back to their chalet Bas was thwarted by not being able to rouse the exhausted and possibly inebriated Andy to open their door.

Andy also did other jobs to earn himself some money, such as hospital portering and it was at Carshalton Children's Hospital that, in 1965, Andy met Marian, who was in her second year at college, but also working at the hospital. Marian's mother didn't much care for the long-haired scruffy student that Marian took home, but she and Andy

hit it off and those days were remembered as a very happy time. Despite the fact that they had very little money; walking, cycling, listening to an eclectic range of music and a few pints of real ale were relatively cheap ways of enjoying themselves.

Marian and Andy were married in Sutton in Surrey on the eleventh of November 1967 and spent their honeymoon in Street where they were house-hunting. Andy had got a job at Elmhurst, at that time the Grammar School, teaching Maths, P.E, History and English. However, nobody had told them about the Glastonbury carnival which closed down the road that their bus was on and they duly sat there for hours wondering what on earth they were letting themselves in for, in deepest, darkest Somerset.

Their first home was in Pearmain Road from where they subsequently moved a hundred metres or so to the house in which they have spent the rest of their married life. Their children Chris, Jenny and Steve were born in 1968, 1971 and 1974. In 1973 with the re-organisation of education in Street, Andy moved to the newly formed tertiary college, Strode College where he then taught economics, business studies, 'O' level maths, was a personal tutor and ran the chess club. The family loved Street, happily settling into life there, and Marian found her niche at the local pre-school which she managed for twenty-five years.

Andy's work ethic was astonishing. Not only did he love teaching, imparting his great knowledge and encouragement to his students but he was such an organised and methodical man that he could pack extra-curricular activities and family activities into each day with precision and success.

There have been many lovely and highly complimentary comments on Facebook, from former students all acknowledging Andy's teaching skills, guidance, dedication and efficiency: 'he inspired me to study economics', 'an amazing positive influence in so many people's lives', 'a chess master gently guiding our play', 'a legend of Somerset swimming. . . made us all better with his no-nonsense approach', 'fond memories of Andy training us hard and putting up with us on those mad Saturday coach trips around the south-west with the swimming club'. 'I have never seen a person get so much on an A4 piece of paper and so neat as well'.

Andy learnt to drive in the early seventies and the family fondly remember their Hillman Minx, which cost £25, complete with the bright orange rust repaired patch on its wing and which everybody would pile into for holidays. However, it is a widely known and undisputed fact that Andy's chief method of transport was his bike. One year in Rag week at Strode college, the bike was held hostage and placed on the roof of the college until ransom was paid.

Andy cycled everywhere and encouraged his children to do the same. They might say 'encouraged' was too gentle a term as a lift in the car was not an option and they used to beg for lifts to school from Andy's colleagues Don and Maureen on an unpleasant rainy day. Andy cycled with his children to whatever interest they were pursuing: swimming, football, riding, guitar, flute, rugby; he was their 'facilitator' and everything was timetabled to perfection. He was a hard taskmaster in whatever he led but it got results, with his own children as well as his students: all three children still ride everywhere now, the swimming club had enormous successes and Andy's students'

pass rates were through the roof. He was a perfectionist and he demanded equal commitment from everybody he worked with.

Andy took on the role of Tutor/Counsellor with the Open University as well as his lecturing and family commitments. He would have to go to Taunton sometimes for seminars and as the last bus home left before his course finished he just cycled there and back.

Holidays with the family were usually in the Lake District with Bas, Nalini and their family, to an unused railway station near Appleby which was an outward-bound centre. The children slept in bunk beds in what were waiting rooms, with inter-city trains whizzing past the window at certain times of the day and night and the kitchen table in the ticket office could accommodate more than thirty people. There were jobs to be done in exchange for the holiday and there was hiking, building dams, catching frogs and lizards, eating endless tuna sandwiches which Jenny now finds repulsive, climbing fells, but almost always repairing to a pub at the end of the day, or in the middle, or both. Other holidays taken were in Aberaeron in North Wales, and even later in Cornwall at Sennen Cove where Andy and Bas would drink endless bottles of red wine, and put the world to rights with their loud voices which kept Marian and Nal awake into the night. When Jenny and her family began to go down to Sennen with Andy and Marian, Andy would be up early to walk the dog Grommet and be back before breakfast. Andy loved dogs but would never have one of his own because he knew its loss would affect him too much.

Apart from being able to repair punctures, and wash up, Andy's practical skills were non-existent. One of his school woodwork reports said of him: 'Andy is theoretically sound but practically useless'. He only read academic books or guides on hiking. He had very eclectic musical tastes which spread throughout the whole gamut; rock, folk, classical, opera, jazz, blues and Gregorian chant. He loved running, swimming, hiking, exploring Somerset, especially the Quantocks. He just couldn't keep still. He was a very basic cook: his children remember corned beef hash as an example of his basic cooking; he was a bit of a miser, or maybe just one for a bargain, and would never buy expensive wine. He took Sainsbury's up on their very kind offer of taking wine back if it didn't meet with expectations, obviously having already consumed most of it. He also thought that a good way of comparing wines in a supermarket was by labelling the price per percentage of alcohol. For all our sakes, I hope this never happens!

Andy first realised that he was physically ill when his own swimming times began to get worse, despite having given up smoking his famed roll-ups, and training harder. He found it difficult to tell people about his diagnosis of Parkinson's because he didn't want to be defined by it and he was determined to enjoy the health that he had for as long as possible. He thus retired from work in his early 50s and kept as fit as possible. As a bloody-minded person he even cycled to Yeovil and back for his consultant appointments and refused the medication that he was advised to take. Why take the bus 15 miles to be told you can no longer do the things you love when you can prove to them that you can.

Andy walked for many hours with the family, through Peck Mill farm, to the Hollow Tree, up to Street Hill and on to the Hood Monument. Although also very popular

Dundon Hill and Lullover were less frequent walks as they generally involved a trip in the car. Andy relished walking to the Hood Monument but it was bittersweet in recent years, he enjoyed every second leading the way despite it becoming more difficult with each step. He would not give up, absolutely determined to walk, and walk and walk.

Material things meant little to Andy, his love of life came from being in the open air, the natural environment and most of all, his family.

Nineteen years ago, Andy became a granddad to Josh whom he loved looking after: he had reminded Jenny to sign him up for the swimming club before he was even born. Of all the grandchildren Josh has had the privilege of knowing his granddad when he was still fit, although Josh had a big surprise one day when he poured himself a glass of blackcurrant from a Ribena bottle which turned out to be red wine. They always seemed to be digging holes together; maybe Josh can explain why. Andy mellowed with his grandchildren and as well as being slightly kinder to himself he was probably also less demanding of them.

However, over the years things have become steadily more difficult for everybody and about nine years ago Andy stopped driving because it was no longer safe to do so. As his balance became an issue he tried a tricycle, but this was actually more of a problem than a machine with two wheels. Even when he began to experience signs of dementia, Andy still thought he could do everything and would go for very long walks or try to get to the pool for a swim. He was a proud man who tried never to let anything beat him and he would have been horrified to have people feel sorry for him. His life had started with a battle against difficult conditions but through sheer determination and resilience and with virtually no male role model of his own, he has been a wonderful husband, father, granddad, teacher and friend: 'his own man'.