

A Celebration of Life

Stephen Robert Ledbetter

5th December 1953 – 5th August 2020

Friday 28th August 2020 at 11.30 a.m.

Mendip Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Stephen Robert Ledbetter was born on 5th December 1953 in Birmingham, to Eileen, a housewife, and George who was a supervisor in insurance. Stephen's brother Andrew was born in 1955 and the whole family moved to the southern outskirts of Leicester.

As a young boy Stephen was a scout, enjoyed walking and climbing, was a bell-ringer and was particularly keen on model railways. The brothers were given the choice of having a bedroom each or sharing a small bedroom and using the larger room for the model railway.

They chose the latter but teenage boys sharing a confined space inevitably resulted in the heated exchange of words and worse.

Stephen went to Wigston Grammar school where he didn't work as hard as he might but having got a place, through clearing, to study Civil Engineering at Dundee University, he left with a first-class Honours Degree. He also met his future wife Anne there.

Stephen liked to tell the story that whilst Bristol University refused him a place as an undergraduate, they awarded him a Doctorate and that similarly, Leeds University denied him a place as an undergraduate but later offered him a Chair, which he turned down.

Steve and Anne married on leaving University and moved to London where Anne, who had a law degree, took up a job in the insurance industry. Steve followed his career in civil engineering.

Two years later they moved to Bristol for Steve to do research into dams and earthquakes, something he was disappointed had not been part of the undergraduate course. Following the award of his PhD he accepted a place at the University of Bath so that Anne could continue her career. His professor at Bristol told him that they didn't do proper engineering at the University of Bath, implying that this was not a good career move. How wrong he was!

Stephen and Anne's two children Ralph and Moira were born in the 1970s, and the family moved from Bath to the village of High Littleton, and as both parents always worked, the children had au pairs to help with their care. Stephen and Anne were also very heavily involved with the Liberal Democratic party and the children remember helping with leafletting during campaigns. In fact, Stephen was once asked to stand as a political candidate in the 1990s but although nothing came of that, Steve did serve as a Parish Councillor and a school governor for the village church school. Stephen thought that the fact that he 'didn't do church' might constitute a problem but was told that it didn't matter provided he could resolve the school's difficulties. Steve thus became the first Chair of Governors who was not the vicar, since its formation in Victorian times.

Family holidays were usually spent camping and walking in Scotland and Moira has retained her love of this activity. Ralph thinks of his father as a man who was always keen to impart knowledge, sometimes a little too assiduously but always with the best intentions, and teaching remained one of Stephen's loves. The Centre for Window and

Cladding Technology, of which Stephen was the first Director, have also effusively acknowledged the huge contributions Stephen made to the industry. He was responsible for writing Standards and Guidance documents and developing the MSc courses which have created new generations of façade engineers and this was a legacy of which he was justifiably proud.

It has become a bit of a fond idiosyncrasy that as a dedicated teacher Stephen was also known to always carry both a red and a blue pen in his top pocket, in order to be able to write his comments or corrections to whatever he was reading.

Steve was very proud that both his children achieved doctorates; Moira is an analytical chemist at Abertay University in Dundee, and Ralph is an environmental scientist and works at the national research centre in his field.

This does contrast with the relationship with his own parents who never really understood what Stephen did and he remained 'a bit of a mystery' to them. It was with great sadness then, that he realised that he would not be able to have any involvement with his two grandchildren's upbringing. Emily and Jacob were a source of quiet pride to their grandad and I'm sure their parents, Ralph and Michelle, will keep his memory alive to them in the future.

Anne and Steve separated after more than 20 years, agreeing that they had grown apart. Steve moved back to Bath where he met Brenda, who also worked at the university. They moved to Chegworth House eight years ago and after 20 years together they married earlier this year. Intending to downsize and not intending to take on a project, they rather liked Draycott, saw potential in Chegworth House and spent the next two years renovating.

Semi-retirement allowed them to pursue their interests, both individual and together and they have had some lovely holidays. They have spent a week or two in the Dales every year, have visited European cities and also had some long-haul holidays: a train trip through the Canadian Rockies in 2018 and last November a trip to India.

Stephen revitalised his interest in model railways. He spent thousands of hours on his layout which has gone to a good home. The local model railway group has taken custody of his layout and has named it 'Ledbetter Junction' both in big letters and in 4mm high letters. Required to give his station a name, he called it 'Clifford Chambers Street', which is a reference to the village in Warwickshire where his family lived 200 years ago. With an interest in genealogy, Steve had pursued his family tree back for 250 years down some branches.

Steve was very active in the village being involved in the walking group, Draycott Memorial Hall, skittles and the saving of the village shop, a task which he says caused him to neglect his model railway. He researched and set up a Community Benefit Society in order to share ownership and limit the liability of individuals. He raised sufficient money to enable the village to own the shop. Steve worked during the refurbishment, and as a volunteer in the shop in the early mornings. He very much regretted not being able to work for the shop beyond the first couple of months.

Stephen's renown in his field was widespread: he was once introduced to the speaker at a lecture, being told that the speaker knew more about cladding than anyone else. The speaker replied, 'Stephen and I know one another very well; Stephen has taught me all I know'. And in another conference of technical experts in Italy, Stephen was referred to as 'the godfather of façade engineering'

When I met Stephen at the end of June, he mentioned a quotation by George Bernard Shaw:

'The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.'

Stephen was not an unreasonable man but, in his work, he has left legacies that have resulted in progress. He was a mixture of pragmatism and optimism and his abiding hope was that what he had done throughout his life had in some small way changed the world for the better.