

A celebration of life Rodney John Birks

1944 - 2019

3.20pm 21st November 2019, Southend Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

The Tribute

Rod was born on 14th. March 1944 at Stratford Hospital London, the younger son of mum Elsie and Dad Alf, he had one brother Geoff who was five years older. As a young man he enjoyed rally driving with his brother Geoff who did the driving whilst Rod was the navigator. Rod was an “East End boy” growing up in Leytonstone. He progressed through school and technical college and he gained an apprenticeship with Fords at the age of 16 years.

Fords had encouraged him to go to university, but he wanted to continue his apprenticeship, and did so, for the next 4 years. He qualified as an engineer (working mainly in Dunton). He took on many different roles within the firm including being a union representative during his long, happy career at Fords.

His passion for cars, scooters and motorbikes started early and was to remain an enduring one throughout his life. He enjoyed nothing better than tinkering with car engines at home, helping friends and neighbours with their cars; often working with his friend Bill Baker.

When he retired from Fords, he treated himself to a Harley Davidson motorbike. There is a fantastic photo of him and Judy on this bike in old Leigh. The bike is apparently still in the family and being lovingly cared for.

Rod was a family man devoted to Judy, his three children, his grandson Ryan, stepchildren and daughter in law. He was very special to all of them enjoying their company and trying to help and support them in any way he could. He encouraged them to follow their own interests and passions in life as he had done. The Christmas parties he so enthusiastically arranged for family and friends are fondly remembered he was a great host and cook.

He loved to fuss over people making sure they were all fine and happy. He was known to always be active, doing something, fidgeting, and once finally “still” he would drop off to sleep!

Rod was to meet Judy in 1989; a meeting of “like minds,” and they were married in 1990 setting up home together in Westcliff. They had a mutual love of travel and it took them all over Europe. They especially loved Germany and had many happy holidays there with friends Peter and Ellen. Rod was in Germany as recently as three weeks ago with Mike visiting old Ford colleagues.

Rod and Judy also enjoyed travelling all over the UK but found a real sense of peace in the Norfolk Broads area, so it was here they decided to buy another home. This gave Rod a chance to develop a new passion this time for boats he could often be seen “chugging upriver” with his beautiful wooden boat “Winsome” and later, other boats. Rod and Judy made lots of good friends in Norfolk especially when Rod joined the committee of the RTTA (The River Thurn Tenants Association). It was typical of Rod that if he joined a community, he would want to contribute to it.

In 1995 he had a heart valve operation and subsequently a stroke. He experienced the profound frustrations of communication difficulties; this was especially hard for a man with such adept communication skills. He worked hard in his own recovery and it is typical of Rod that as soon as he was able to, he started to “pay back” using his own experiences. He became a very active member of The Stroke Association visiting other sufferers in their own homes offering his support to them.

He has been described as both a “Committee man” and a “Party man”. These activities embraced his ability to listen well, his love of hosting and his organisational and mathematical abilities. He was a generous man keen to offer his skills to so many other people through his committee membership and practical help, taking a real and active interest in other people’s lives. He could involve himself in all aspects of the organisations from leaflet dropping to meetings, no job too small. The beneficiaries of these committees were many, including the Labour party (he ran for councillor a couple of times). The Ramblers club where he was chairman and organised many of their walks. He enjoyed walking with group members and really listening to what they had to say. His varied interests spawned many club memberships; the Jaguar Ownership Club after he got his beloved convertible classic Jag (pride of his garage) and the Harley Davidson Ownership club. He was also a member of the poetry club and through Judy’s encouragement the local film club (although known to usually be asleep ten minutes into the film). He was willing to try anything new if Judy had an interest in something, he would join her even if it didn’t initially appeal to him. He enjoyed sharing a beer with friends at the local pub, or just working in his man shed. He also enjoyed “Dad dancing” in the kitchen with Judy.

Tributes from David Rowland and Joe Cook.

Rod and I first met over forty years ago when my family moved to Thorpe Bay in the mid-Seventies.

Rod lived just around the corner, and turned up to ask if there was anything he could do to help,
or if there was anything we needed.

I soon learnt that this was so typical of Rod; always ready to help others,

Rod soon introduced me to The Half-Way House, the only Pub in Thorpe Bay, where we spent many a happy Sunday evening.

And I am glad to see some of his old Thorpe Bay friends here today.

In the mid-80s I got divorced, and eventually moved to Westcliff.

What a coincidence, for in a very short time, Rod got divorced too, married Judy, and also move to Westcliff!

So The Hamlet Court, where we shall be this evening, became our new watering-hole.

At one time there used to be over half a dozen of us who regularly met up there,
coincidentally on a Thursday afternoon.

The staple topic of conversation was often rugby, especially during the Six-Nations,
when each season we held a sweep to predict the result of each game, which more often than not, Rod would win!

Rod liked his rugby, and particularly enjoyed the 50 minute walk to Southend Rugby Club,
always stopping at the Railway Pub for a pint, there and back.

Rod loved his walking, and did much with and for the Ramblers Association.

He persuaded me to join him on the 23 mile millennium walk around the Boundary of Southend Borough.

We must have enjoyed it, as we did it again when they repeated it a few years later.

Those who knew, always admired all the work Rod did for stroke patients, and the Stroke Society.

Rod enjoyed jazz, as we appropriately heard as we came in.

But not so many knew that Rod also enjoyed poetry.

The Secretary and Chair of the Southend Poetry Group, who are unfortunately unable to be with us today, asked me to convey the high esteem in which Rod and Judy are held in the Southend Poetry Group. And it is good to see so many poetry members here.

Rod often told me that he enjoyed poetry but didn't really understand much. He enjoyed it because his father used to read poetry to him when he was a boy. The following few lines, scribbled on one of our many walks, he particularly liked, and said it reminded him of his Dad :-

The paths we walked
are dank bracken now,
fronds and ferns of time :
frost on fields of youth.

Once, when we stood,
we heard a corn crake
croak, and saw gossamer
bright with dew,
on a spiders lair.

Time chimes,
as changeable as clocks.
But Autumn leaves
still must fall.

Time chimes.
Then we remember,
Those we loved.

David Rowland

Judy, family and friends –

we were all shocked by the sudden loss of Rod, who seemed to be indestructible. Judy & family, you must be devastated and our hearts go out to you.

As you know, the baton has been passed to me by Bill, to say a few words on behalf of Rod's work, labour party and union friends and I hope I can lift our spirits a little, as I'm sure Rod would have wished.

when Bill emailed our Ford test ops old "fellows" – the toofs – he asked for memories of "the great man" – and that is how I believe we all remember Rod – a great man.

To me he was a friend - a brother (in the union sense) – a comrade as a fellow socialist. At our lively monthly Ford retirees gatherings at the Bell Inn, I think it's probably fair to say (if not an understatement!) that Rod's and my views on politics were not widely shared. In fact, they were probably limited to the two of us? We hardly needed to speak to know we were in agreement on most things political.

rod's beliefs translated into activism on behalf of his work colleagues as a valued union rep, standing as a local council candidate and volunteering in the community. We shared a passion for assisting those with disabilities.

rod's integrity as a staff union rep was off the scale – an example to us all – and I think this was his mode for all aspects of his life.

his appetite for fun though, was infectious and together with Judy, he hosted some great parties as many of us will recall.

he was incredibly active with a busy 24/7 schedule – he always stood during the monthly pub meet-ups. Rod was certainly no couch potato!

now – about those requests for memories of "the great man", there's a common theme throughout each anecdote, apart from Graham Burgess's memories of the Jaguar drivers club and "3 B Motors Ltd" – Birks, Burgess & Baker.

The common theme seems to be Rod's appreciation of the finer beers and similar refreshments!! Rod and his good friend Peter Klimke, Cologne snr

crash test engineer, took this to a high level, analysing and debating the merits of the finest german beers. Their friendship extended to their wives and visits to each other's home towns.

dave price recalls the frequent Colgne-Stansted flights they shared and the visits to the pub at Ford End. Dave said their wives could never believe how they landed at 6pm but didn't get home 'till 10.

dave also recalls a BBC TV team doing a "Made in Britain" programme. This was his first meeting with Rod, in Finland doing a cold engine test. Rod used his union rep's skills to negotiate an excellent payment deal for the out of normal hours filming, though they never got to see the broadcast in which Rod was the star performer.

stories from Mark Povey and our very own Bill Baker also had a drinks theme. Bill's tale was of Rod and him working on a friend's car when a young lady with a clip board sought signatures to oppose a new pub being built just down the road by Thorpe Bay station.

I think we can all picture the scene when Bill says he was about to sign, when Rod suddenly shot up from under the car, protesting and saying how good it would be to have a pub so near. Bill signed, much to Rod's disgust. Bill reckons Rod's ethos was " you can never have too many pubs!"

I'll leave my own memorable Rod stories till later, to keep this short.

As I have said, losing Rod in such a sudden way has shocked and saddened us all and devastated Judy and the family. Yet we all know that Rod would want us to smile and enjoy those happy memories.

we'll all miss Rod – truly "a great man"