

A celebration of life
Patrick Edward Clerkin

03 July 1931 to 07 February 2019

3.30-4.30 pm, 21 February 2019, Islington Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Patrick was known for his sparkling blue eyes and head of lovely white curly hair, for his cheery hello, and his generous nature. He was friendly and sociable, and was one of those people whose deeds help to cement communities together, even if just by a smile of recognition in the street or a short chat at the bus stop. Patrick sometimes referred to having had difficult times and hard feelings, but his positive attitude was stoic and philosophical.

Patrick was born on 3rd July 1931, in Cavan, in the Republic of Ireland, very close to the border with Northern Ireland, and he grew up on a farm with his mother, stepfather and siblings. Life in the rural farming community in the 1930s was hard enough, but a level of cruelty was added by his stepfather, who pulled him and his sister out of school when they were very young after his sister hurt her leg in an accident. The reason, he said, was that the teacher did not do enough to help. Patrick was six, and he was now set to work for his keep. He never went back to school.

His mother remarried and we think Patrick had, apart from his elder sister Margaret, some stepbrothers who, like him, moved to London. He arrived in his early 20s and was supported by the newly opened London Irish Centre in Camden – a stone's throw from Euston where the train from Holyhead terminated. Run by Catholic priests, the Centre offered much-needed support for Irish immigrants – it was a lifeline for many at a time when Irish people often attracted hostility. Amongst other things they found him accommodation in a boarding house. He was a shy young man, but we think he had a cousin or local friend from Cavan who took him under his wing in London and showed him the ways of the big city.

He worked as a labourer for a time, later becoming a groundsman for London Borough of Camden Parks and Gardens. There are photos of him laughing with his mates, trimming hedges and trees around Hampstead and St Pancras.

He lived in Kentish Town and had an allotment where proudly he grew many vegetables and started his extensive collection of pieces of wood and other bits and pieces he always enjoyed gathering from around the bins. He took great pride in finding things he could reuse, repair or give away.

Patrick only went back once to Ireland after leaving, and there are pictures of him smiling with his mother and sister. He lived in Gaisford Street for well over 30 years

and was known by many of his neighbours as he would be outside trimming any unruly hedge, loudly laughing and chatting to passers-by, somewhat shocking to some with his head of thick curly hair, and loud toothless laugh. He would trim those hedges – wanted or unwanted – and we think it was because he so loved helping people and talking, and being outside being useful and sociable.

Patrick was kind and loyal to those he liked, but if you upset him, often for completely unknown reasons, he would sulk stubbornly. He cared for his old friend Fred for many years, taking him his morning paper and doing other errands every day, come rain or shine.

He enjoyed spending time with his good friend and upstairs neighbour Charles until his death in 2006. There are photographs of Patrick having drinks and gatherings with friends, indoors and out, so although they are not here today, it is sure that he was loved. There were also stories of his special friend Bridie whom he grieved when she died.

Anna came to know him after she moved into the flat upstairs. And he soon became a daily part of Anna and her daughters' lives and a dear friend. She became aware of his kind and generous nature, and soon got to know the man who was already familiar round about as a bit of a character. His store of wood on the balcony was augmented by all sorts of things – artificial flowers, rosaries, decaying boxes of chocolates, pens and old hot water bottles – he never knew when any of these things would come in useful. But one man's rubbish was another man's treasure in Patrick's case. He often insisted, with unrequited enthusiasm, a need you hadn't foreseen, and an ideal solution in some found or bargain item he had squirrelled away. From curtain rings to crisps, nips of whiskey to celebrate and odd found shoes, he enjoyed solving problems with a smile. He couldn't bear waste and was an up-cycler long before the term became trendy.

Thriftiness was hard-wired, so his generosity took the form of making people gifts of whatever he had to hand – whether it was an old hair-dryer or a three-legged table to which he'd hammered an extra leg and then varnished in an incompatible colour. He may have cut a bit of an eccentric figure, with his well-worn clothes, goblin braces and his 1970s spectacles, but he was a man who had his own way of doing things and was naively sweet and funny about that.

He was vulnerable, though, because he never learned to read or write, which he felt embarrassed about, but he shouldn't have. He was a joy to chat to. He followed the news on the radio and TV, very loudly as he became increasingly deaf. He liked his routine – listening to Prime Minister's Question Time on Wednesdays, tuning in to Desert Island Discs on Fridays, taking a bath on Saturdays ...

One of his big joys was going on the bus to Sainsburys to buy bargains and chatting to everybody on the way and in the store. Consequently, he had a lot of food to cook and eat and he became a big homely generous man. Having often gone hungry as a child, food was very important to him, and he also devoured cookery programmes on the television. His own cooking tended to be on the traditional side – Anna soon got used to the smell of overcooked cabbage and sausages wafting upwards from his kitchen.

His illiteracy brought with it practical difficulties, however. For example, it was very difficult for Patrick to keep in touch with his siblings. Anna offered to take him back to Ireland to see his sister Margaret, but he insisted – with a resigned laugh – that he preferred being at home and it would have changed too much. However, thanks to a friend called Gladys he had some telephone numbers written in a book, and Anna was able to help him get in touch with Margaret by phone. This led to regular calls from Anna's house. It was also special for him to be able to make contact with his niece, also called Margaret, who came to visit him and kept in touch afterwards.

Friendship with neighbours led to sincere, mutual relationships: people looked out for him. As well as Anna, Jamal, who lived opposite, would be seen popping in with a bottle of whiskey from time to time. Patrick always liked to end each encounter with a witty remark, and that never changed even as he lost his memory.

When Patrick became less fit, he accepted the help of the Irish centre befrienders service. And one happy day, Emer Kelly arrived. Patrick adored her. When Anna asked how he'd got on with the Befriender, he said the 'young lassie' was so wonderful, 'she's better than God'. Patrick also became very fond of her 'Charlie Boy', as he called her then boyfriend (now husband), Michael.

Patrick started to get dementia and was looked after in his last years by the carers at Maitland Park Villas with regular visits from Anna and Michael and Emer and their new son Oscar Patrick. Michael and Emer and the baby made Patrick very happy.

And although there is no doubt that he resented the input of the social services and his limited mobility, he took it with good grace and received ever increasing interventions with humour and humility. All the carers spoke fondly of Patrick and reiterated what a kind man he was, with a great sense of humour. One of the cleaners there had a bald head, and Patrick had a recurring joke with him about being able to throw away his comb. It was hard for him though, as a man who had always worked outdoors, not to be able to leave the building.