

*A Celebration of the life of*

## **Andrew Varney**

13 November 1945 – 19 August 2024

28 August 2024, Eden Valley Woodland Burial Ground

*Celebrant: Felicity Harvest*



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I had the privilege of meeting Andrew just a couple of weeks before he died, so this story is based on his own words, and the words of his close family. When we met he was in bed, wearing his red La Pasionaria T-shirt, with its legend "Better to die on your feet than live on your knees", in Spanish of course. An instruction he clearly lived by.

Andrew was born in Norwich on the 13<sup>th</sup> November 1945, the eldest of Vera and Ian Varney's four children. Andrew was followed by Richard, and later by Nigel and Celia. Richard now lives in Canada, Nigel in Spain and Celia in Australia, hence the live streaming. Ian originally worked in motor manufacturing, but after a bout of pneumonia he was advised to change to a more rural occupation and the family moved to Writtle in Essex. It was a very small community, and the children were involved in all the local activities – cubs, scouts, the church choir and so on, and they went to the local primary school where Andrew was seen as the "teacher's pet" and consequently bullied. It was a hard life, with Ian on a basic agricultural wage, and Vera, a nurse, eked out the family budget with dressmaking and making gloves out of rabbit skin.

Ian finally got a better-paid job in Swanley in Kent, and the family moved there. The move disrupted Andrew's secondary education, meaning he missed a year, but he did well at Hextable School, excelling in French. He went on to Norwood Technical College to do radio training, condensing three courses into a single year and gaining a PMG Class 2. His text books from that period are still on the family bookshelves.

He had been fascinated by the idea of the sea from his boyhood. His aunts had sent him postcards with pictures of ships, and his father took him to the cinema often to see films about boats and the navy – and there were many at the time – from *Moby Dick* to *The Battle of the River Plate*. His eyesight wasn't good enough for the Royal Navy, but he joined the Merchant Navy as a radio officer.

Of course, radio was not just his work, it was his hobby too. Fellow radio ham, Martin, will I'm sure tell you all about that if you want at the end of the ceremony.

In the Merchant Navy he made three major journeys. The first was to South Africa where he witnessed the horrors of the last years of the Apartheid regime, a major formative experience, as was seeing how religion, which he had taken for granted as a child, was used to oppress people in different countries. Then he went to South America, sailing up that River Plate which had inspired him as a boy. The social life when they were ashore was great for the young men who formed the crew, with cheap beer, snooker and lots of dancing. And it was at one of those dances that he met a young woman called Monica who was working as a student nurse in Buenos Aires.

## **Monica**

*I remember the first time I met Andrew in Buenos Aires. It was at the Missions to Seamen, The Flying Angel, where we nurses from the British Hospital used to go twice a week for our night out. I remember him crossing the well-lit up dance floor to ask me to dance, though he wasn't into dancing much. We then went out a few times while the ship was in port.*

*We exchanged addresses and I must have written once or twice, and he, too, sent me a card, saying "Remember me?" I must have wondered at the time if I would ever see him again until I came to England. I contacted him again, and wondered if he would reply. Lo and behold, he arrived one day at my doorstep in a bedsit I shared with my sister in Beckenham. He didn't have a moustache then, wore dark brown rimmed glasses (like ones worn by Michael Caine at the time), and smoked a pipe. He invited me to go and see Boeing Boeing.*

*We never got see Boeing Boeing (We went to see Canterbury Tales, instead), he dispensed with the pipe, and eventually a moustache appeared and the dark brown rimmed glasses changed to John Lennon type gold-rimmed ones. He even bought a Castro type cap, which I approved of, the type worn by someone else he admired, Bob Dylan. His mother, however, did not approve of the cap, and threw it away! I then became aware of the strong character of the mother.*

*Andrew introduced me to folk music, and we attended the Surbiton Folk Club several times. Soon I was also to attend the proms at the Royal Albert Hall and learned to appreciate Shostakovich. To appease the mother I concentrated on doing a bit of knitting and crocheting, and in some of the early photos of Andrew he is actually wearing a cardigan I knitted and a crocheted tie.*

*After we married and moved to Biggin Hill, I investigated what was going on there in connection with two of his interests, politics and cricket. We soon became members of the local Labour Party and he began to play cricket with the local Biggin Hill Club.*

*It was a great deal of fun as it meant being involved myself, occasionally making sandwiches and watching him play, as well as bringing the children to play around.*

*We remained involved with the Labour Party until Andrew left because they weren't paying enough attention to green issues.*

*When we moved to Edenbridge I got in touch with the local cricket club again and Andrew played for Edenbridge as well. It was nice to see that not only was he involved with his work, but could also engage with people he met in Edenbridge via the cricket. But one day he decided that he wasn't happy with his bowling, so he gave up, and we had to find a way of engaging with another of his passions, sailing. We acquired a kit to make your own boat from Hunter's and it was the kit to make a gaff-rigged Minstrel.*

*For a few years the hull of this boat occupied our front lawn as we put it together. I had very little experience of sailing so I did a competent crew course and eventually we launched our boat in Rainham on the Medway. The next few years we sailed up and down the East Coast during the summer when he could get a break from work which was now in Australia, and later on in Norway.*

*His other passion was walking, and when I was diagnosed with breast cancer, my "therapy" was to do the Wainwright Coast to Coast, which we completed after a few*

*years. Fortunately, my cancer did not come back. We did other long walks, bit by bit, sometimes using a car to get there, but many times by public transport.*

*Crystal Palace Football Club was another lifelong passion. He had his phone set up to make sure he was alerted to any developments at the club. He wouldn't miss listening to or watching a single game that involved Palace and there was always a look of glee on his face if Palace had won a match. He even persuaded me to go to a match with him – just the once!*

*All in all, life with Andrew was a lot of fun, but also stimulating and challenging. I got involved in a lot of activities I would never have done if I hadn't met him.*

Andrew's final trip in the Merchant Navy was to the Far East, a trip which took him to Mumbai, Hong Kong, Singapore and other Asian ports. In India – like other young men of the time – he fell in love with Indian Classical Music, particularly Ravi Shanker on his sitar. You heard his *Morning Raga* as you assembled. But there he got hepatitis and was sent home, and after a long convalescence he began working for Decca Radar in Chessington.

Andrew moved on from Decca to work for a firm called GP Elliot which was part of the booming North Sea Oil business. The firm devised safety systems for oil platforms, and Andrew needed to go out to the rigs. One would have thought this would have played well with his passion for the sea, but no – it was a horrendously dangerous environment and in Andrew's words "no place for a family man".

From there, he moved on to a London-based contracting company which became part of a large civil engineering conglomerate. And then in 1988, a former colleague rang from Australia and said "Andy, we're desperately looking for a safety system engineer, are you interested?" He was, and the next three and a half years were spent mainly in Australia. On his return to the UK, he worked briefly in Scotland, and then he and Monica headed off to Norway, and they lived and worked there off and on until 2005 when he retired.

He was hugely respected by his colleagues. Peter Yarrien wrote to Monica:

*"I have no words to ease your loss. He was a lovely man. An excellent engineer, if pedantic at times, and always a good colleague to work with."*

Jim Russell said:

*"I am so sorry to hear this sad news. Andy was an absolute gentleman and very highly regarded. I am proud to have had him as a colleague and friend for 30 odd years. Condolences to Monica and family."*

And just as his colleagues valued him, he valued his colleagues, and was inspired by their passions. It was Ray for example who introduced him to Crystal Palace.

## **Julian**

*We gather here today to honour and remember my father, a man whose life was a rich tapestry woven with passion, conviction, and love. My father was many things to many people, but to those of us who knew him best, he was simply the heart of our family.*

*From a young age, my father was drawn to the sea. Sailing was not just a pastime for him; it permeated his life. In his early adulthood it gave him a job & an opportunity to see the world. It led him around the world and ultimately to Argentina where he would meet the woman that became his wife, our Mum. Growing up, our family holidays were never far from the water, whether on canal boats or paddling our family canoe, we seemed to spend a lot of time afloat. Later sailing became his passionate hobby. He spent countless hours aboard his beloved yachts, first "Quester" then "Joletta," with my mum by his side, exploring the waters of the Medway & the Southern coasts of England and finding peace in the rhythm of the waves. And when he wasn't sailing there was always something to fix or improve. His boat was his sanctuary, a place where he could connect with the world & busy his mind. His love of sailing was infectious, my own sailing experiences have clearly been influenced by my Dad. I spent time on the water with him when in the UK, and on occasion swimming in the water rescuing moorings or dinghies.*

*My father's passions didn't end with sailing. He had a deep and abiding love for his garden, a testament to his patient hands and nurturing spirit. Tending to his garden was his way of creating something tangible that could be appreciated by all. Whether to admire his flowers or eat his bountiful produce. Or for Mum to juice, stew, bottle, freeze or otherwise prepare the endless supply from the garden. It was his quiet retreat, a place where he could immerse himself in the simple joys of growing flowers & vegetables.*

*One of the most valuable lessons my father instilled in me is the importance of giving back, of using our time and talents to uplift others. He believed that we all have a responsibility to make the world a better place, and he led by example. Whether it was volunteering as he did for many years with the RNLI, chairing the local cricket club for a time, advocating for his chosen political Party, helping at the Hoo Ness Yacht club, championing sustainability in Edenbridge, or working to restore the Medway Queen, my father was always ready to roll up his sleeves and get involved. He knew that change doesn't happen on its own; it requires people who are willing to stand up and make a difference.*

*And stand up he did – often, and with great passion. My father was a man of strong convictions and even stronger opinions. He was never one to shy away from a debate, whether it was arguing that cricket was superior to baseball with his brother, defending the rights of the downtrodden, or sharing his love of music. You never had to wonder what Dad thought about something – he was always more than willing to tell you. And while we may not have always agreed with him, we always respected his unwavering commitment to what he believed in.*

*But he wasn't all seriousness. He loved to joke, and played the typical Dad role of pun-master when we were younger. Though you could always see his jokes gathering wind towards you from a long way off, we would be powerless to stop the boat from moving. He had a devious humour, he loved popping inflated pomposity; of spotting the fun in an overly serious moment. Just a few days before he passed, as I helped him onto the commode one afternoon, he looked at me with a smile on his face & said "it's nice to share these moments with my son".*

*Above all, my father was a man who loved deeply. He adored his grandchildren, and they brought him immense joy. He cherished every moment he spent with them, whether it was through a simple conversation or an adventurous outing. When we made the difficult decision to move to Australia, I saw a rare tear in his eye. It was a tear that spoke volumes—of the deep bond he shared with his grandsons, and of the heartache that came with the pending physical distance between us. But even from afar, his love for them never wavered, and he remained a regular presence in their lives. He loved it when they called him and was visibly moved when my Alex wrote to him (an actual letter) whilst completing his basic training for the Australian army. He delighted in his role of "Grandpa Bristles" to his grandchildren. He loved their squeals as he rubbed his beard against their cheeks when they gave him a hug.*

*Our dad taught us to argue our convictions passionately, to volunteer our time selflessly, and to love, laugh & enjoy the simple pleasures of life vigorously.*

*Dad was loved by all of us, and his absence leaves a void that can never be filled. But as we say our final goodbyes, let us remember the man who lived his life with passion, who gave of himself freely, who held firm to his beliefs, and who loved his family with all his heart.*

*From "Life and Fate" by Vasily Grossman, one of Dad's favourite books:*

*"For life is not a static thing – it is a movement, a rhythm. It is the endless ebb and flow of the tide, the beat of the human heart, the rising and setting of the sun. And in this rhythm, we find the essence of our humanity, the ties that bind us to each other and to the world around us."*

*Through his volunteer & community work, his connections with his family & friends, our father's kindness, generosity & actions impacted us all, creating a ripple effect of positive change that will continue to inspire, guide, and shape our lives, leaving behind a legacy of love, kindness & shared experiences.*

*We will miss you, Dad, but we will carry your spirit with us always. Thank you for everything you taught us, for every moment you shared with us, and for every memory we will hold dear. Rest in peace.*

## Douglas

*We've been listening to some of Dad's favourite music and reflecting on the significant role music played in his life. A large portion of his LP collection consisted of folk and blues records—pre-electric Dylan, Joan Baez, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie, Big Bill Broonzy, and Paul Robeson. There were also esoteric collections of industrial and maritime folk songs, which were always entertainingly colourful and eccentric for the kids. Later on, classical music took centre stage—there was clearly an intense Shostakovich phase—but he always had a special fondness for folk music, especially if it had a rebellious streak.*

*As Felicity mentioned, Dad started out as a radio ham and later became a radio officer at sea. He went on to study electrical engineering at college and eventually became an electrical engineer, specialising in safety systems. This technical background surfaced in various ways later in life. Naturally, when personal computers became available, their introduction into our household was unconventional – thanks to Martin's influence – bypassing more popular, game-oriented machines in favour of an Apple II+ loaded with business software and quirky games that no one else seemed to have.*

*This necessity to program the device ourselves gave me an early introduction to computer programming, which later became my career – though not before he gently tried and failed to persuade me to study engineering. When we renovated our house, he loved to discuss and advise on the electrical rewiring, as well as the installation of our solar PV system and air-source heat pump.*

*Dad clearly had a keen sense of adventure, evident in his book collection, with entire shelves devoted to the heroic period of Antarctic and Arctic exploration—Scott, Shackleton, Franklin. During his visit while I was living in New York, we toured the home of Herman Melville, where he recounted how the film Moby Dick with Gregory Peck had a profound impact on him as a boy.*

*Dad loved walking, and his diminishing ability to enjoy long walks in his later years was a particular source of sorrow. From my earliest days, I have memories of countryside walks, which evolved into long-distance, multi-day family hikes. There was an annual long walk after New Year's Day, where we boys took pride in charging miles ahead of our parents. We walked the Vanguard Way down to Shoreham, and later the Cotswold Way. When Mum and I visited him in Western Australia while he was stationed there, he took us to the Stirling and Porongurup mountain ranges in the south, where we climbed several peaks—one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Where better to see, in the words of Banjo Paterson, "the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended, and at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars." When my daughter Charlotte did her Duke of Edinburgh hike, Dad was delighted to pass on some of his kit – his rucksack and lightweight tent – and to see it put to use by another generation.*

*That sense of adventure also manifested in our canoe trips. The Canadian canoe travelled with us wherever we went, including Norfolk and Scotland. We navigated several rivers, such as the Medway and the Great Ouse, and crossed Scottish lochs. On one occasion, we somehow ventured out in the middle of a storm, battling crashing waves and strong winds, to land on a rocky island shore festooned with jellyfish.*

*My dad inherited a passion for brewing beer and making wine from his father, a hobby that Julian and I have also embraced to some extent. The wine cellar was often stocked with bottles of apple and elderberry wine, and later, parsley wine. After he became involved with Sustainable Edenbridge, juicing the apple crop from his and my trees became an annual tradition, with the help of his grandchildren. One of the highlights was the joy of mashing the apples by trampling them in a pair of clean Wellington boots. The results sometimes turned into excellent cider.*

*In fact, Dad loved food that was homegrown and homemade. He particularly enjoyed blackberry and apple pie with custard, welcoming it to the dinner table each time with considerable enthusiasm. Another of his dinner-time joys was the painstakingly constructed pun. You could always sense when one was coming, and by the time it arrived fully fledged, it had been given a good build-up.*

*I can also attest to his deep love for his grandchildren. Even in his last days, lying in bed and apparently asleep, he would respond to a kiss and a cuddle with a good bristle on his beard, something we were well accustomed to as kids ourselves.*

You've already heard how the early family holidays were dominated by boats. Later on, they travelled further afield, to France, southern Spain, Tunisia, Morocco and Malta and to Canada to see family. And as you've heard, once the boys stopped going on holiday with them, Andrew and Monica would hit the long-distance walking trails.

It was on a trip to Patagonia in 2018 that Andrew's first symptoms emerged, and his increasing ill health has dominated the last few years. Monica has of course been a wonderful support during this time, continuing her own interests in painting, poetry and singing to keep herself strong – even if Andrew usually referred to her “singing with the squawkers”.

We often think of death as a cruel enemy, taking away those we love, but for those who are suffering or who have reached the end of their endurance, it can come as a quiet friend, closing the curtains, turning off the light, and settling us into a last sleep, free from pain and weariness. I hope it was so for Andrew.