

## Ian Willis Tribute

### From Ian's sister Janet

Ian was born in King Street Wimborne in 1951 in a house right next door to the Minster's west tower, where the Minster car park is now. The house may have disappeared but it still stands in miniature in the Model Town. As very young children we would listen to Dad ringing the Minster bells on practice nights. Very occasionally he would go to the top of the tower and wave to us down below. We both went to Sunday School at the Minster and as an older member Ian sometimes helped with the younger ones, making his own device to roll pictures around to illustrate stories.

When Ian was 6 and I was 3 the family moved to Victoria Road. In childhood days it was a home with plenty of space, having allotments at the back going down to the river. We had 3 or 4, keeping chicken and growing vast amounts of vegetables. Our grandfather kept golden pheasants and Ian wanted some too so built an aviary at the bottom of the garden, giving the colourful cocks colourful names such as Lord Humphrey.

Mum and Dad taught us both lots of practical skills – gardening, cooking, sewing, knitting. I knitted mostly doll's clothes and a Saints football scarf but Ian knitted his own jumper and a cardigan.

Whilst at Wimborne County Primary School Ian baked cakes to sell to raise funds for a new swimming pool which the dads were helping to build.

All of the family liked to enter in the Wimborne Horticultural Society Show. Mum's handicrafts and jams, Dad's vegetables, and Ian liked to bake. One year, 1961 it was, at the prizegiving, the winner of the Cowdery Cookery Cup for most points in the Adult Cookery Section was announced and, to everyone's surprise, up walked a young boy to collect the cup. It was 9-year old Ian beating all the ladies. This made the local newspaper and then South at Six news. We had newscaster Martin Muncaster and film crew in our small kitchen.

A friend recalls "I have this little image of Ian on the television telling the reporter that he just used a wooden spoon."

The newspaper clipping which I still have reads 'Ian's sister Janet will be seven on Friday and Ian has been entrusted with the job of making and icing her birthday cake.'

His friend Hannah has just sent me a photo of her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday cake made by Ian, reminding me of just how many cakes Ian created for friends and family, my wedding cake included.

As children we had our own gardens, quite large, growing vegetables and flowers, sometimes inviting neighbours to a sale in the garage of vegetables, flowers and home baked cakes for a charity. He liked to get a gardening book for birthday or Christmas. His bedside cabinet was full of gardening books and his bedtime reading was Percy Thrower.

Ian also attributed his love of gardening to Rural Science lessons at Wimborne Secondary Modern School and the extra time he was allowed to spend in the school garden.

His friend Martin remembers that at school he and Ian were both put in for Rural Science CSE. Ian came out top in Dorset and his friend second.

Mum and Dad got him his own greenhouse and gave him free rein over some garden projects. It was his idea to build a fish pond with a rockery, a water cascade and a fountain. Then a pergola with climbing plants. He learnt to graft fruit trees at school and brought them home to plant. On the allotment, under Ian's guidance we built a brick and mud stove and cooked our own 'interesting' soup.

The secondary modern school really suited Ian with all the practical subjects and excellent drama productions. I still have a bookcase he made with perfect dovetail jointed corners. He loved being in the school musicals, once playing a very grand Emperor of China in 'The Nightingale'. He carried this on as a member of the Wimborne Light Operatic Society for several years.

Around 1970 Ian was a founding member and chairperson of the Wimborne Youth Aid and Action Group, based on young Minster goers. One friend from then has recently sent me the rules sent out by Ian reminding members that the aim of the group was to meet socially on Wednesday and Sunday evenings, to raise money for charity and do a good deed every Sunday afternoon. Ian was the driving force of the group, organising the senior citizens' Christmas party and many of the various tasks we undertook. Friends remember the fun we had doing all of these as well as camping trips, parties, and decorating our own room in Church House.

His friend Jeremy recounts - Back in the 70s we were given the task of redecorating some rooms of the almshouses. One of the residents was quite difficult and refused to leave her room to allow for redecoration. Ian quickly quipped with a wry smile. "Oh, we shall just have to wait until she takes her afternoon nap and put a large dust sheet over her and decorate around her. We must remember to take it off afterwards or everyone will think she's died!"

Many of us in the youth group went on to join the newly formed Wimborne Rotaract Club. Ian has kept many of that group together by hosting an annual reunion.

On leaving school Ian served an electrical apprenticeship with the Southern Electricity Board before being invited by a friend to join his company, CI Electronics in Salisbury, as a rep for precision weighing systems. He did this for a number of years, but demonstrating how to weigh out ingredients to produce tablets to pharmaceutical firms - and producing bags of tiny peppermints in the process - was never going to be something he would be passionate about! Before too long he went in the direction he was destined for and started his own interior decorating business, remaining self-employed for the rest of his working life. His large circle of Wimborne friends and word of mouth kept him very busy.

When I was at teacher training college in Winchester Ian was a very good big brother, sending me little parcels each week (a somewhat squashed banana in my pigeon hole, wrapped up in brown paper and posted, was the most memorable one!). He sorted me out with a moped when my digs were too far out, also what every student needs - a record player, a sleeping bag and an alarm clock, all very thoughtful. It was whilst I was away at college that Ian was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes which he then lived with all of his life. He didn't let it stand in his way, but he didn't always manage it well.

The squashed banana reminds me that this year, unable to meet up at Easter, Ian still got my chocolate Easter egg to me during lockdown. He measured the aperture in the post box just up the road, unwrapped the egg, smashed it, wrapped it back up again in its gold foil then cling film, flattened the box, popped it all in a jiffy bag and posted it letter post. It tasted just fine - and I made a decoration with the box!

Ian bought his first property in Poole Road and enjoyed doing it up. Unfortunately, it flooded and he had to do it up again. Then in 1981, with the passing of our elderly neighbours in Victoria Road, Ian was able to purchase their property, and set about transforming it, moving bits around, knocking down some bits and adding bits - lots of bits! He was a dab hand at decorative paint effects - feathering to look like wood grain or replicating the mottled effect on doors that he had seen in a National Trust property. And, of course, he completely transformed the modest garden into a showpiece.

One of the early garden projects was the shell grotto. Matthew, John and I were given the enjoyable task of collecting shells from our local beaches and were very pleased when we found a pub which could source umpteen big scallop shells. Many more imaginative projects followed. With Mum and Dad next door he could fill their sheds and carport with all his building bits and things collected. In 2002 he opened his garden under the National Garden Scheme, as he has done every year since, except this year. He told me that he wasn't going to bother putting bedding plants out this year as he couldn't share them with anyone.

Ian had a lifelong love of gardening and the decorative arts. He was never still, always bubbling with ideas, and with a new project on the go which needed his attention. He loved going around an antique fair, auction room or reclamation yard. When, in recent years, he was left a house in Sidmouth's most prestigious address, Fortfield Terrace, built for the aristocracy in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, there was so much to do there, not only in clearing and repairing the property and looking after tenants, but in researching its rich history, decorating the house elaborately and designing a new garden. To his delight he discovered that the property once hosted royal visitors. He made friends with the terrace residents, enjoying hosting social gatherings in his garden there too. As one couple wrote, 'Ian was our landlord but, more importantly, became our friend.'

Ian was a Wimborne man through and through with a wealth of knowledge of Wimborne and Dorset history.

As tributes to Ian arrive there are some adjectives that crop up over and over again to describe him, kind, eccentric, unique. That was Ian!

He was well known around the town and it is with regret that his many friends cannot join together to celebrate his life at this service today. Ian would have wanted a party afterwards, with drinks, food and happy story-swapping.

The many groups Ian belonged to in Wimborne have their own tributes to pay.

## TRIBUTES FROM OTHERS

### From long term friends from Wimborne Rotaract Club

A group of us from the Minster were welcomed to the new Rotaract Club set up by Wimborne Rotary. The highlight was the trip to India. We stayed in pairs in homes or small hotels. Ian suffered with too much rice so the pair of us stayed overnight in a private hospital so he could be sorted out. The ideas for his Indian Conservatory came from this tour.

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On our India trip back in 1981 I was very worried that his suitcase full of chocolate bars would melt in the heat. Fortunately, it was November and pleasantly warm, not the searing heat you hear about.

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Ian, and I, were involved with the Rotary/Rotaract exchange with India in 1981. An experience none of us will forget. Ian kept in touch with some we met there. Earlier this year we'd even talked about a return visit to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the trip.

Ian was great at keeping in touch. He kept the camaraderie of Rotaract going through the years with his New Year parties (appreciated especially by those of us who no longer live in Wimborne). An opportunity to meet, catch up and marvel at Ian's latest addition, or more often creation, in his home or the famous, and quirky, garden.

Ian was a complete one-off, from his maroon velvet smoking jacket to his unique DIY projects, he embraced life in his own inimitable style.

A horse-drawn carriage is so befitting, I can hear him laugh at the thought of it.

"What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others"

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Once Ian was driving several of us around Bournemouth. The car was not running very well and was giving out lots of smoke. Ian had got in the habit of pulling out the choke button to use it to hang his bag on!

### From Wimborne Civic Society

Ian was a genuine English eccentric; he carved out a path for himself through life, quite distinct from anyone else I've ever come across, and in the process of making his way touched the lives of more people than I could possibly count. How blessed we all were to know and work with Ian, and how very much we'll miss him.

Ian was a founder member of Wimborne Civic Society in 1973, joined the committee almost immediately and very soon took on responsibility for membership and subscriptions; since he knew half the people in Wimborne by name, and the other half by sight, he was an ideal person for the job.

He remained a mainstay of the Society for the rest of his life, helping Robin Noscoe rebuild the Gazebo off West Borough, providing ideas for speakers and visits for the members to enjoy and leading his annual 'Walk Round Wimborne' as the Society's contribution to Dorset Architectural Heritage Week.

This last was a unique combination of history, architectural criticism, reminiscence and high-class gossip.

In addition to all that, Ian opened Serles House and the Secret Garden for several afternoons every July and August; Civic Society members staffed these cheerful occasions and in return Ian gave a generous contribution from each day's entrance fees to Society funds. The Society's committee and members join me in giving thanks for all that he did for us, and for the joy of knowing Ian, many of us for several years.

One last 'picture': at each garden opening, Ian would don his large yellow top, on which was written something like, 'Welcome to Serles House. I am Ian.' What more would anyone need to know.

He was ...Ian.

### From Wimborne Arts Society

By any standard Ian was such a unique person. He was generous to a fault and really would do anything for anyone.

He was a loved member of the Wimborne Arts Society and was a founder member. He was always a great contributor particularly when it came to fund raising often involving an event at his house or in the garden. For 23 years he was our treasurer and maintained a cash book in which he recorded absolutely every item of expenditure and income. When it came to transferring this information to a statement of accounts, Ian would just shrug and say - this was too complicated and let someone else do it, which, of course, someone else always did.

You will remember at your mother's funeral when Ian gave the eulogy, he arranged for tins of chocolates to be circulated because he was going to take a little time. Ian was certainly different.

As a cook his stews were memorable, usually described by him as Road Kill, and I for one was prepared to believe him.

During this year's recent covid 19 situation Ian held a number of tea parties in his garden for small groups of people at a time, maintaining the 2-metre distancing (more or less), because he thought that people were fed up with being isolated. This was so typical of Ian, thinking of other people.

### **From the National Garden Scheme**

Ian joined the National Garden Scheme in 2003. He opened The Secret Garden at Serles House, not missing a single year all the way through to this year when he would, of course, have opened had it not been for the pandemic. He shared his garden with over 10,000 visitors during his 17 years of opening. An amazing achievement!

Alan Titchmarsh once described his amusingly created garden as 'one of the best 10 private gardens to visit in Britain.' Quite an accolade! His ingenious use of unusual garden plants complemented his treasure trove of garden objet d'arts. Virtually every year something 'new' was added to the garden so visitors returned year after year to see his latest 'idea'.

Not only did he open his intriguing, unique garden to visitors but also his fascinating house. Several times he opened in December when wine and Christmas themed eats were provided. Father Christmas was in attendance with a little something for every child who visited and a pianist played Christmas music.

This scenario was so typical of Ian. His great passions were his garden and house and entertaining and bringing people together therein. He was a natural fit for the National Garden Scheme and SO disappointed not to open this year.

He was a wonderfully eccentric, unique, always caring, giving person who did indeed 'make a difference' to those around him.

### **From Marilyn Barber, Dorset View Magazine**

When I visited Ian in 2001 to do a preview on the opening of his garden for Wimborne in Bloom for an article for the Stour and Avon Magazine I was bowled over by the creativity and quirkiness I found. And when the story was printed, there was media frenzy and subsequently numerous magazines and TV stations featured him. In 2014 he invited me to open the Oriental garden as a thank you.

I interviewed him several times over the years, and found him to not only be excellent company with his cheery optimism and zest for life, but also a kind and thoughtful man.

### **From Dorset Buildings Group**

Ian was a much loved and supportive member of Dorset Buildings Group. He was involved in many ways but he will be remembered in particular for 3 things.

- ❖ He was always willing to offer his home for meetings and summer picnics.
- ❖ He always organised excellent cakes for our Winter Meetings.
- ❖ And his amazing contacts list allowed our group to visit many beautiful houses in Dorset which are not open to the general public.

He enriched our lives and will be greatly missed.

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"A year or two back, Ian and I found ourselves at the same Auction: he being the man of much experience and I, the absolute beginner. We sat companionably on the settee of his choice, whilst Ian tutored me on the art of bidding. Truly a man of instinctive good taste and kindly thoughts."

#### **From Wimborne in Bloom and the Minster Church Flower Festivals**

The programme notes for when Ian first opened his garden for Wimborne in Bloom stated 'The masterpiece of an eccentric' and this we feel summed up Ian to a tee, he was perhaps the nicest eccentric we ever knew.

He was one of our greatest supporters and will indeed be sorely missed by us and many others throughout the Town.

Ian was a great asset with his help at the Minster Flower Festivals

#### **From East Dorset Antiquarian Society'**

In 2019 we were so delighted to welcome Ian to the archaeological excavation at his former family home, Keeper's Cottage, on the Kingston Lacey Estate.

He came armed with numerous old photographs and endless stories from times gone by. Much of this was captured on film, so that Ian and his priceless memories will happily live on for generations to come.

#### **From Friends of Victoria Hospital Wimborne**

Ian, along with Mum and Dad, had a special link with Victoria Hospital and their generosity and support has been invaluable over many years. Serles House and garden are a delightful expression of Ian's character.

#### **From friends**

I would like to share a couple of little moments that will hopefully put a smile on people's faces.

The cream and jam scones.... At one of his wonderful tea parties his blood sugar levels had dropped so Steve, Carol and me took it upon ourselves to get everything ready. I popped to check Ian was ok and let him know everything was in hand, Carol was dishing up, Steve was putting the jam and cream on the scones and I was going to start running the plates out. He looked at me and said, 'Is Steve putting the jam or cream on first?' I gave him a confused look and said, 'Does it matter?' Yes, apparently it does! Ian, feeling much better now, scooted into the dining room to speak to Steve. I grabbed a couple of dished up plates, put my head down and ran away. This was the day I learnt that the cream has to go on first and then the jam.

Another, that many of you will have seen some aspect of, is Ian's organisation and note making system!

I would go in to clean the kitchen and Ian would say, 'Don't move anything.' I would look at a windowsill littered with bits of paper, each with a scrawled note on and think, how am I supposed to know where these go?

Thank you for the joys of the mobile phone – I would take a photo, move the bits of paper, clean, put the bits of paper back exactly in the same places, delete the photo. Filing system not disrupted!

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I visited Serles House about 12 years ago but didn't get as far as the garden as I spotted Ian's piano and he allowed me to PLAY it. This kind gesture opened up SO many doors!

I was invited to beautiful country houses, then the castle on Brownsea Island, Christmas gatherings with all sorts of local friendly and interesting people -- all IAN's friends, over many years.

He was such a kind and generous person. I will never forget all my musical adventures that HE made possible --- and the loveliness goes on.

#### **Finally, from a good friend**

Ian was my friend for over 30 years - his wonderful quirky personality was a joy to behold - Never will there be another in the mould of Ian - he was a one-off and this world is now missing a truly unique original lovely man.