

Tribute

Written by Lawrence Davis' family, read at the Memorial and celebration of his life held in Tibberton on 22 August 2021.

Grandad loved words but didn't like to waste them. Meetings had to be short and efficient, phone calls and sermons too. He would have liked to hear that people thought he was "a good bloke", but would not want things to get too effusive. In that spirit we have tried to make this tribute in celebration of his life as short as his many years and accomplishments will allow. If we have left anything out please do raise it under Any Other Business at the Village Hall later on.

The starting point when thinking about grandad's life has to be Tibberton. Few people have their lives and identities so closely entwined with one physical place as he did. For the past 20 or so years Grandad had been the oldest surviving Tibbertonian born and still living in the village. Not only was he born here, at Woodcroft, but like his ancestors he didn't move far from his birthplace – only 150 yards down the road.

He always said he was "*born at a very young age*", the only child of parents who – like many others in the village – worked for the Price estate. His Great Grandfather was estate carpenter, his father worked in the greenhouses and both his Grandmother and mother were in service there. He entitled his life story "Son of an Undertaker". The nature of the family trade meant he was never afraid of the business of dying – though his mum wasn't too keen when his dad put him inside a coffin once, to try it out for size!

From the age of 9, Grandad helped his father in his business as a carpenter, wheelwright and undertaker. He used to tell a story about how one morning while he was digging a grave he spotted the Bishop coming up the church path, and cheerily shouted "Morning Bishop!" from inside the grave, making the Bishop jump!

He was lucky to get a bike when he was 8 years old, and used to ride up and down the road practising tricks – sitting on the handlebars and riding backwards, standing with his feet on the saddle, and slow bicycle racing – while 6 year old Nana watched starry-eyed from inside the gate at pear tree cottage. She remembers that sometimes she'd get lucky and have a ride on the crossbar, which meant his arms were around her as he held onto the handlebars. He was still able to win the slow bicycle race at the flower show in his 80s. Later, he had a Triumph motorbike that Nana liked to ride pillion on when visiting relatives in Wales. However, a few spills – a famous one involving Nana rushing to pick up scattered apples before checking to see if Grandad was hurt – may have put him off.

Grandad always enjoyed learning, and was encouraged to read from an early age by his parents, who bought him a set of encyclopaedias and got out books with him from the mobile library. He had an Oxford English Dictionary tome for every letter of the alphabet – where the last word in any dispute was to be found, even long after the advent of the internet. As a small child he

played games and read with his maternal Grandmother, who he credited with his lifelong love of reading, games, and quizzes. She also took him on trips beyond the boundaries of Tibberton to explore the seaside at Weymouth and Weston.

Grandad took his 11plus when he was 10plus and got a scholarship to the Grammar School. He did well, but only got to be top of the class once, when the cleverest girl was off for a term! At school, he especially enjoyed history and geography. These subjects, and the local area, were always key elements in the quizzes he so much liked to compose and run in the village, spending many a happy hour researching and learning new facts in preparation. Unfortunately, he did not get the chance to go to university. If he had, he probably would have liked to study law. He certainly believed that if there was a rule, it should be followed; and could be quite scary if you tried to flout it!

There was a brief interlude in his late teens when he was called up for national service. He was stationed at Stafford where he was entrusted with the important task of issuing stationery supplies. He did physical training too, and didn't enjoy any of it very much. Probably the only thing he took away with him from his years of service was his regimental number, responding "Sir! 2, 3 double 7 one double three" whenever Reuben or I called "GRANDAADD", many decades later. He started and finished in the RAF as an Aircraftman second class but was told by his commanding officer that, had there been a third class, he would have been in it.

Although the air force was no fun, he was dating Barbie, his childhood sweetheart from three doors up the road. Nana remembers him teaching her to dance in the road outside pear tree cottage, the two of them singing hymns to dance the ballroom steps he had learnt at school to. When they were in their teens and the weather was bad they would secretly use the village hall for their courting as Grandad knew where to get the key, his mum being the booking secretary. He would come home from Stafford to see Nana at weekends and they'd talk about their future plans over a packet of rollos, and kiss by every telegraph pole on the way home.

All this sweet talk must have involved lots of sweets, as in his early 20s his teeth went bad. This was compounded when, while playing cricket, he caught the ball in his mouth. By the time he married Nana at 25 he had a full set of dentures, allowing him to indulge in two desert spoons of sugar on his cornflakes every morning for the rest of his life – inspiring jealousy in me and Reuben.

He played cricket in Tibberton and football for a while, but it was table tennis that he and Nana played for many years for the village. He dabbled in golf, and loved to play pitch and put. Having demonstrated his golfing swing to his young daughters on holiday one day, his 5 year old decided to try and imitate his style on the crazy golf course. Unfortunately, 3 year old Zoe was standing just behind and got the full impact of the swing and bears a scar on her forehead to this day.

After leaving school, he started work as a clerk in the rates office of Gloucester Rural District Council. His parents were probably pleased he had a job that was not dependent on physical labour and the price of elm. This marked the start of his local government career that was to last just over 43 and a half years. He soon moved into building control and his career took off, ending up as Chief Building Surveyor for Solihull Council, President of the Institute of Building Control advisers and member of the Government's Building Regulations Advisory Committee. He was so proud and happy to be nominated for an MBE for this work in the new years honours of 1986.

He wrote the National Exhibition Centre's regulations on public safety and got to see a lot of very noisy bands while ensuring the public was safe from building collapse. Grandad managed to combine work with travel quite a bit and visited almost all the European capitals when he was researching comparative building control systems. He loved his job and was well respected and liked.

Most people here, of course, will know Grandad from his role in village life. He got involved in helping to organise village events at a young age when he was called upon to keep the youth club in order; which probably began his reputation for being a bit strict about rules. He is remembered for castigating his fellow youths for kissing under tables. His first official village position was as Honorary Secretary of the Village Hall Committee when he was 16 (though he lost that position to his Mum when he went off on national service, and she never gave it back). He has been Clerk, Secretary, Treasurer, Chairman or President of most of the village committees, with the longest stints on the Flower Show Committee and the Parish Council. Grandad was very proud of the new housing that the Parish Council worked to get built during his time as Chairman - a role he gave up in 2019 as he felt it wasn't right to do the job into his 90s.

Grandad's chairing of meetings was legendary. Some quotes from poems and letters sent to celebrate his 80th birthday give a good picture of this. "His insistence that everything is done by the book, his dislike of timewasting and his delight in being controversial are legendary: one meeting he chaired barely lasted quarter of an hour, yet everything on the agenda was covered"; "Clever fellow - I was scared stiff of you but you have been very supportive over the years" or in rhyme; "Seven thirty on the dot meeting starts, Knowledge of all things he imparts."

People also mentioned what a good friend he was. "Lar has been a staunch and ever ready friend. Sure he has his style, and a manner sometimes reminiscent of Billy Goat Gruff, but he is always there, always constant and always true." Grandad loved to be busy but always had time if someone needed his help.

He was a constant source of wisdom, giving us short, key pieces of information to remember, such as "*let the saw do the work!*", or the magic number 142857 (which always returns some iteration of itself when timesed by any number below 7). Every time we left Lawbara, grandad always said goodbye to me and Reuben with the same wise promise - "*see you when you're older!*". He was a very good teacher - if he had learnt it, he shared it. When several villagers wanted to learn ballroom dancing, he taught them in the village hall and built up a large collection of dance music for village dances. He taught many people to drive, and only when his students could do precision hillstarts without squashing a matchbox placed behind the rearwheel did he give them a pass mark.

He loved local history too and again shared what he had learned in his two histories of Tibberton – the first of which was given to each household in the village. He also wrote a history of the Price family, a history of the Flower Show and collaborated on other books, including the Footpath Walks book. He really loved the village and everyone who has and continues to make it what it is.

Important though his career and his many official roles were to him, grandad's heart was always most closely with his family and his home. Nana and Grandad married in 1955 and spent their honeymoon in Bournemouth. As they boarded the train, Nana remembers she shouted to the crowd of friends who had come to see them off "*OH, I've forgotten my knitting!*", which was met with a roar of laughter. On their return to Tibberton they moved into Lawbara, the house Grandad built with Nana (to her design), with help from their families. By 1959 he had two daughters and was also busy with table tennis, meetings, measuring, drawing plans, tealing up 2 be 2's, gardening and occasionally playing hide and seek.

In the garden at Lawbara, smoking his pipe and pricking out penstemon cuttings or tending to his roses and sweet peas is where he was truly in his element, perhaps bodging up a mending job with a match stick; considering how to execute the latest landscaping plans Nana had hatched, or in recent years sitting outside doing a crossword, codeword or super sudoku and watching the robot mower do its job.

He had a wry, gentle sense of humour. He loved Morcambe and Wise, Monty Python, and he took delight in puns, wordplay and limericks. He was interested in life, people and history, in the fine details of how things work, and what words mean. He loved maps and always had a pencil behind his ear. He loved record keeping – from cricket scores when he was small, to stamp collections, to rain measurements later in life. He loved the weather forecast and for years he timed when to go to bed by the shipping forecast and Sailing By.

In the many condolence cards we received, the most often used phrase was "He will be so missed". He *is* so missed, by all of us. But we are here to celebrate his rich, long life – a much longer life than he ever expected. As he said himself in his life story:

"I have had a charmed life, have thoroughly enjoyed practically every minute of it, not everyone gets the good fortune that I have had, good health, enough money to live on, a loving wife and family – what more could I want?"