

St Andrew's Church, Shrivenham, 29 January 2014: A Service to Celebrate the Life of

Mervyn James Penny, 10 November 1923 – 14 January 2014

Conducted by Revd Canon Richard Hancock

A TRIBUTE TO MERVYN PENNY

Written by Therese Penny and Derrick Beer

Delivered by Derrick Beer

May I say at the outset what an honour it is to be asked to offer this tribute to Mervyn.

I am deeply indebted to the family and to Therese especially, for gathering together the many strands of Mervyn's life.

Given the richness of Mervyn's life, no one could manage to cover everything or mention everyone that was important to him. So please accept my apologies in advance.

Mervyn was born in Stockcross; the first son of Jim, a master carpenter, and his wife Nellie. When Mervyn was 15 they moved to Shrivenham and ever since he has played a big part in village life. Though for Mervyn, as with most things in his life, his 'village' reached beyond normal boundaries and encompassed not just Shrivenham but Watchfield and Highworth too, as well as further afield.

One of the first people he met on moving to Shrivenham was Les Judd, who took him under his wings. They were to join Swindon's Railway Works on the same day and to be close friends for life. In the early 1970s, they gave talks about Shrivenham's history. But it wasn't just well-researched facts. The audience were rolling about with laughter as Mervyn, dressed in old smock and hat, described life in bygone times. Even a serious academic was wiping the tears from his eyes.

Mervyn's humour helped, too, with Guided Tours of the village. His vast knowledge, plus amusing and interesting anecdotes, really brought the tours to life.

Another of Mervyn's projects was research about the Pauper and the Overseer, based on Shrivenham Parish Records. He even sought the advice of an Oxford don, and photographed and enlarged microfiche records in order to read them.

Mervyn's passion for history made him a key figure in Shrivenham's local history society. Working closely with Tony Jones, he ensured the preservation of a wealth of documentary and photographic evidence. He also helped to find a new, dedicated home for Shrivenham Heritage Society's wonderful collection, upstairs in the Memorial Hall.

In 1992 he and Vivien Moss worked closely together on the restoration of the village Pump, fulfilling a dream that Mervyn's friend Les Judd had had in the 1970s.

In 2003 Mervyn researched and restored the ancient sign-board outside Tariffa Cottage.

These projects, plus the village stocks, are but three of his numerous achievements. His fingerprint is everywhere.

Aldbourne, his father's home, had an annual 'Beating the Bounds': an ancient custom marking the Parish boundary. Mervyn walked this for the first time in 1975 with his friend Roy Powell. Both came back with the idea that Shrivenham could do the same. They approached the Parish Council, and the custom was re-instituted in Shrivenham. It grew from 14 walkers the first year to as many as 130. And the ribbons given out for completing the walk – a different colour each year – are collectors' items.

When Shrivenham's A420 bypass was mooted, Mervyn became the project's Official Photographer. His beautiful album of the development, from its beginning to completion, is lodged in the Heritage Centre.

Mervyn's interest in photography had started early, sparked by his Dad taking pictures of local people. Aged around ten, Mervyn saved up newspaper coupons and got his first camera: an Ensign 116.

Over the years his interest in photography blossomed. With a dark-room packed with chemicals, he took all sorts of pictures. Breath-taking Ansell Adams-type landscapes and wonderful portraits. A key member of Swindon Photographic Society for many years, he gave evening classes and even had a one-man exhibition at Swindon's Wyvern Theatre. He has probably taken the wedding photos of many here today. And his and Margaret's Christmas cards have become an institution.

Mervyn's skills were evident on photographing the Moss family: four children and a dog. He looked a little perplexed as he re-arranged the furniture, and said how difficult it was to get, say, *four* people looking at the camera at the same time. But with *six* people, to say nothing of the dog, it would not be easy. Yet his consummate skill produced, not just one, but four different photos. And in each all fourteen eyes are looking at him.

For many years Mervyn shared his love of photography by giving illustrated slide talks. Some about his favourite places: Aldbourne and the River Lambourn. And other places further afield: Dartmoor, Skye and Ireland. There were talks on folk song – what it is, when it was sung, and how it passed down the generations – and one on the English Farm Wagon. At the Memorial Hall afterwards, you can see one of Mervyn's beautifully made scale models. And his model of Great Coxwell barn is currently held by the National Trust.

He entertained various groups, including 'old people', many of whom were 20 or more years younger than Mervyn. Here, he played instruments, sometimes made by himself, and was joined by his great friends Rose Little, from the White Horse Folk Club, or Judy Harris, from Highworth Songsters. Mervyn's many monologues – mostly gleaned from Stan Holloway - are legendary.

He also helped Bridging the Gap: an inter-generational arts project. There he amazed and intrigued participants of all ages with memories of times past.

Despite leaving school at 14, Mervyn's skills in local history, his depth of research and his love of literature confirms a favourite saying: 'You don't go to school *to* learn, you go to school to learn *how* to learn'.

Limited schooling didn't inhibit Mervyn's enjoyment of a wide range of humanities subjects. Sarah Nicholls recalled that one summer, when the Highworth Songsters Club closed for two weeks, Mervyn had a gap in his diary. So he suggested starting a poetry reading circle. About eight Songsters then started to meet at each others' houses to read their favourites - Barnes and Hardy for Mervyn!

His autobiography, *Saturday's Child*, is brilliantly well written. It has been published, raising money for Mervyn's favourite charity, Prospect. He has busked for Prospect, and sold his famous runner beans.

Mervyn's fundraising started early: inspired, perhaps, by his mother and aunt. As children they went house- to-house with bunches of flowers to sell, raising money for Chapel projects. A sponsored head shave wasn't for Mervyn: he grew a sponsored **beard**. After a fortnight, and quite unkempt, he raised a tidy sum. This even inspired a poem entitled 'Whiskers for China'.

More locally, in Watchfield, Mervyn helped start the Acorn Day Centre. This cared for elderly people with mental health problems: meeting initially twice, and then three times a week. When discussions took place to test the venture's viability, two local people were needed to sit on the steering committee. A deathly hush ensued. Tessa Brown recalls Mervyn digging her in the ribs and saying: 'Come on, let's give them six weeks'. Six weeks became almost nineteen years. When Acorn was taken over by Age Concern Mervyn still raised money for them and he went regularly to entertain.

But where Mervyn has made the most impact is through his music: a love inherited from his musical parents.

If he fancied trying out a new instrument, he didn't just go out and buy one: he would make it himself, complete, perhaps, with beautiful wooden decoration and a handmade case.

He entered many music competitions, proudly keeping a file of adjudicators' comments. Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod was a particular favourite. He went every year since 1975, generally dressed in smock and gaiters. In the early years he won his class twice, coming third once. More recently, his younger brother, Michael, accompanied him on the annual pilgrimage, making sure that Margaret knew Mervyn was in safe hands. Mervyn was overjoyed to come second in 2012, his last competitive visit, while he went last year to say goodbye. His placing in 2012 was an amazing feat for someone aged almost 90. And, as Mervyn pointed out, he wasn't beaten by another voice, but by an exotic instrument.

Perhaps not exotic, but lots of fun, Mervyn was a keen ukulele player. He discovered a fledgling Ukulele Club, led by Richard Bending and, as usual, threw himself into things. As Richard says, Mervyn helped to find their first bookings and was fundamental in getting Ukebox Jury off the ground.

Richard also recorded Mervyn's singing and playing for two CDs. Like others who have helped Mervyn to make recordings, Richard was amazed that Mervyn managed to do most of the songs in just one take! Although, on reflection, this might be a clue as to how Mervyn managed to pack so much into his life.

Judy Harris – Mervyn's partner in 'Sentimental Journey' – recalls that Mervyn helped found Highworth Songsters. 12 years ago he and 5 others met in each other's houses to sing for pleasure. Today Songsters has 50 members and has moved to larger premises. Taking it in turns to select which songs to sing, Mervyn chose his final programme on Thursday the 9th of January. He delighted everyone with jokes and monologues. But when his bag of hats appeared it was time to get into character and do Old Uncle Tom Cobley. It was sung, with gusto, for the last time that day.

Mervyn started the White Horse Folk Club in 1974 and there have been very few of the twice monthly meetings that he has missed since that time. Traditional songs and stories were always central to Mervyn's interest and he would often chide the rest of us in his gentle way, if we sang something more modern. Mind you, it would be more than likely that his next song would be a music hall song or a song from a show or a Stanley Holloway recitation!

It is impossible to count the number of people who have visited the club over the last forty years and equally difficult to know the number of people who overcame their fears and sang or played for the first time in public. All of us owe Mervyn a huge debt of gratitude for his vision and encouragement down the years.

In recent years, he had garnered a new audience at the twice monthly meetings of Riverfolk in Lechlade. As always, Mervyn was fully prepared for every session with his bag of props and his array of instruments. How we shall miss the wrapt silence as he performed and the rapturous applause when he sat down.

One small anecdote sums up the spirit of Mervyn. Just a few weeks ago, Ray had agreed to pick up Mervyn to go to Lechlade but when he got to the house, Mervyn had gone to bed. Ray apologised for disturbing him concluding that there had been a misunderstanding. Not to be denied, Mervyn got dressed and came out for the evening!

We will miss his sense of humour, always gentle, sometimes a little risqué and usually very dry. On one cold, thinly attended meeting of The White Horse Folk Club he was trying to tune his guitar with no great success when he looked up, peered around the room and remarked quietly, "Well it's not quite right – but it's good enough for this lot!"

Four days before he died, he came to Riverfolk and treated us to his recitation of "Dangerous Dan McGrew" and a medley of songs with ukulele accompaniment delivered with no hesitation and all his usual enthusiasm. When he was asked if he felt tired and wanted to go home before the end of the evening, he politely declined the offer saying that he was staying to the end!

Summarising Mervyn's interests isn't easy. But when he retired from being Experimental Engineer at Shrivenham's Royal Military College of Science, after almost 40 years, he was given a mitre saw for his picture framing. He was also presented with a Coat of Arms. Specially drawn by Roy Selwood, after brainstorming with Les Judd, it depicts a bewildering number of facets of Mervyn's life. There is a Trophy for the 'Biggest Liar' Competition; fruit and veg from Mervyn's greengrocer's shop, and Morris Dancer bells. Being more than 25 years old, the Coat of Arms is somewhat out of date. It obviously doesn't include Mervyn's recent interests like sculpting, woodcarving and needlework: the latter of which resulted in his iconic waistcoat of musical instruments: researched, designed and sewn by himself.

The Memorial Hall held a special place in Mervyn's heart. Its big hall was where he met Margaret, at one of the weekly dances. **She** was 16, beautiful, with a red carnation in her hair. **He** was a good dancer.

But Mervyn and Margaret were opposites: Mervyn was far more outgoing but Margaret was always game enough to give proposed new adventures a try. So, despite her manicured nails and coiffured hair, they both went caving. **Once**. Camping in a fly-infested wood. **Once**. And potholing. **Once**. Margaret's friend and fellow hairdresser, Betty Eddolls, remembers Margaret's colleagues discussing the latter. They concluded that if it took potholing to get a chap, perhaps they wouldn't bother.

But they stuck together for 62 years, on top of 4 years' courting. The Pennies grew to two daughters, three granddaughters and a great-granddaughter. Mervyn was outnumbered. He used to sigh 'Even the cat is female'.

Mervyn described his daughters, like Margaret and himself, as being completely different. He was a wonderful father and extremely proud of them both. So when Therese, being bookish, eventually achieved her Open University degree, he carried a description of her qualification in his pocket. Then he could tell everyone about her achievement. Marion was far more practical, caring for the whole family and is described by her eldest as 'Mother Hen'. Recently, in particular, she has supported Mervyn non-stop.

His granddaughters, too, were the apples of his eyes. Vicky, like Mervyn, has a 'Can Do' attitude as well as his dare-devil streak: not potholing but bungee jumping. Hannah, reflecting Mervyn's love of learning, made him proud: getting her degree in English Literature from Cambridge University. Rachel, the eldest, followed Margaret into hairdressing but managed without any potholing. Rachel and Jamie's daughter, Sophia, gave Mervyn such fun. He threw himself into their games with so much gusto that you couldn't tell which was the child. And all three granddaughters, as you've just heard, share Mervyn's love of music.

It may be fitting to conclude with a couple of lines from a poem and a verse from a song

Dylan Thomas famously remarked that we should continue to make as much of our lives in old age when he said:

"Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light"

Mervyn did just that. He refused to wither and die just because the years hung heavier upon him.

And an American singer, Si Kahn, wrote these words that seem to sum up all of our feelings.

"It's not just what you're born with
It's what you choose to bear.
It's not just what your share is
But what you choose to share.
And it's not the fights you dreamed of
But those you really fought
It's not just what you're given,
It's what you do with what you've got."

And that was Mervyn. He did so much that all of us are the richer for having known him. We shall not forget him.

Farewell Mervyn.
We shall not see your like again.
Rest in Peace.