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*Following the death of Dick Barratt, Quendon's 'man in the woods', Denise Jennings looks back over 18 years of friendship*

Not long after moving to Saffron Walden in 1991 and while driving to work at Stansted Airport one sunny morning, I happened to notice a kindly looking gentleman walking along the road pushing a pram. There goes a proud grandfather, I thought to myself.

But as I got closer I saw that instead of a baby sitting up taking in the sights there were two dogs, nestled cosily together, noses sniffing the warm air.

During the weeks that followed I found myself looking out for this fascinating trio until one day, curiosity overwhelming me, I just had to stop to say hello. The first things I noticed about the gentleman were his twinkling periwinkle blue eyes. His voice was soft and modulated and he greeted me with a warm and welcoming smile.

He told me that he was used to walking miles, but sometimes his dogs might get a little tired and so he would put them in the pram. He was on his way to the Co-op in Stansted to top up on some groceries. He also told me that his address was The Layby, Quendon. "Come and see me anytime, duck," he said, "Just call out Dick and I will hear you and don't worry about the doggies barking – they would never hurt you."

It soon became practise to stop by every so often to pass the time of day with him. I found him to be humorous, compassionate and gentle, all coupled with a wealth of knowledge.

One day he said to me "Are you religious, duck?" I hesitated. Sensing my slight discomfort he said gently, holding my gaze with his steady blue eyes: "Do you like animals?" "Oh yes,"

came my prompt reply, “Ah, and do you like the plants, the flowers, the trees?” “Yes, yes of course,” I said, visibly relaxing. “So you like nature, duck, that is all right then, because, you see, nature is just another form of religion.” I think I fell a little in love with this wonderful, pure, caring and loving man at that point and that feeling has never changed.

When Dick became seriously ill as this last, bitter winter took its terrible toll upon him, it became sadly apparent that he needed to be persuaded to accept medical help as he became unable to walk due to the severe infection in both his feet.

Even though he was barely able to lift a cup to his lips and despite all our pleas he steadfastly refused to allow any assistance of this nature. Finally an ambulance was called but he refused to get in it. My friend Anne Harlow spent some time with him on Sunday February 22 and at last he agreed to let a doctor visit him. Within hours he was admitted to Addenbrooke’s Hospital, immediately enchanting the doctors and nurses with his natural charm and innate good manners that were so much a part of him. Two days later, with quiet acceptance, he signed the consent form allowing for his left leg to be amputated below the knee due to the gangrene that had set in.

The operation was successful, with no complications and our spirits soared in anticipation. Len, one of the nurses especially allocated to him, said “He is a joy to nurse, so patient, so uncomplaining and always saying thank you.” Everywhere on Ward C4, from the doctors and the nursing team to his fellow patients, he was loved and respected.

When the hospital DJ visited Ward C4 on Wednesday March 4 he asked if anyone would like a request played. Dick said cheerily “How about *Ten Green Bottles*?” The DJ, momentarily disconcerted, said “Never had that request before.” However, he found it and the song was played. How like Dick to choose something cheerful that the patients could enjoy and sing along to. But then, he embraced everyone.

On admission to Addenbrooke’s, when he was asked about next of kin he responded “Haven’t got one of those – anyway, we are all family, aren’t we?”

And that comment sums up the most gentle of gentlemen who saw the world, the animals, nature and human beings through very special eyes.

Sadly, our hopes were not to be realised, for in spite of making an excellent recovery following his operation a swift relapse set in on Wednesday night and Dick died at 2am on Thursday March 5. We were all shocked, including the dedicated doctors and nursing staff. A fellow patient in the bed opposite to Dick said “It was very peaceful; he just seemed to float away.”

Dick was a unique and inspirational man and I was proud and privileged to be one of his many, many friends. He was a man who never needed a key because he did not possess anything that needed locking up.

No trappings of material gain to bog him down, just a genuine love and appreciation of the life he chose, and a very special closeness to nature.