

DEREK PEARSON

One of the appealing features of a village like Audlem is the characters who live here. With the recent death of Derek Pearson, aged 88, we have lost one of those characters. People may not have known his name, but they will remember him by his long grey hair, his pointed grey beard and his bottle-bottom glasses. Also by his distinctive “scuttling” walk and his broad Tyneside accent. Indeed, conversation was a challenge with him, due to his accent, soft voice and “dodgy” hearing: hearing aids were not for Derek!

Derek was a newcomer to the village, having retired to Audlem in 2002 aboard his boat Wylo, that was then moored below Lock 11 for 20 years. Prior to that he worked for many years as a maker of fenders and boat chimneys on the canals, finally based at Marsworth near Aylesbury. He also had a 24’ long unpowered boat that he used as his work studio. He had both Wylo and the workboat (which in typical Derek fashion was simply named “Store”) built for him by Sam Springer’s boatbuilding firm in Market Harborough, and fitted them out himself.

Derek soon integrated into the Audlem boating community, and took it on himself to maintain the fencing and grass on the moorings between Locks 11 & 12. He cut the grass using an old push-type lawnmower which he’d renovated, and eventually acquired a battery-power strimmer: the only problem was he had no mains electricity on his boat. As in many other aspects of his life he was very independent, so having to ask for help to charge the batteries did not come easily.

He was well known to the boating community, and in the evenings of summer months would stand on the back of Wylo with a large glass of red wine, watching the world go by and chatting to passing boaters and walkers.

Derek was sometimes obstinate, wedded to routine, but also very considerate. His consideration was exemplified by always travelling through Audlem and Adderley locks at six in the morning so he didn’t get in the way of other boaters. It’s a shame other single-handed boaters don’t show that same consideration.

His need for routine was shown by his annual spring and autumn trips on the boat to Nantwich and Market Drayton which continued well into his eighties. And also his bus trips to Chester with a friend, which inevitably meant a walk around the walls and a visit to the chippie.

This consideration and gratitude extended to his fellow Audlem boaters: each December we would all head to The Vine in Nantwich by bus (those were the days!) and Derek would foot the bill for a Christmas lunch as a “thank you”. Needless to say, the trip back to Audlem was a raucous affair with Derek serenading us with “Whilst shepherds watched their flocks” to the tune of “On Ilkley Moor baht ‘at”.

Derek was a great railway enthusiast, and built a model of Audlem station track layout on his boat. For his 80th birthday celebration the Audlem boaters took him for a day out on The Severn Valley Railway: oh what a day we had!

But he was not so tolerant of those who were inconsiderate. On several occasions he took to standing on his back deck and blowing his trumpet extremely loudly if a moorer opposite ran his engine after the “witching hour” of 8pm. It always worked, and the offending engine soon was turned off!

Derek was a man of routine: daily walk to Judy’s to collect Daily Express at 0745 (never on Sundays, “it’s full of rubbish”), daily walk up the locks in the afternoon, clothes washing on Mondays, bus to Market Drayton on Wednesdays followed by lunch (always sausage and chips) and red wine in Wetherspoons at 1145 (always in

the same seat), fish cake and chips for lunch on Friday at 1145, bus to Nantwich on Saturday.

His diet was “limited”, tinned Fray Bentos meat pie being one of his favourites, green vegetables definitely being “the food of the devil”. This was partly driven by his cooking facilities being limited to a 2-ringed gas hob!

Puzzles in the newspaper had to be done daily, and he was an avid reader, scouring the charity shop for Val McDermid novels. Classic FM and Radio 4 were his listening choices: no TV for Derek!

He had a keen interest in ancient instruments, and built several for his own amusement. He was also a keen and skilled railway modeller, and built a scale model of the track and buildings of Audlem station.

His weekly night out was a trip to the folk music session on a Monday night. He played concertina and could be occasionally be persuaded to sing a Geordie song. Until his health started to fail he would never miss a Monday night, whatever the weather.

He was hospitalized with a mild stroke in 2019 but soon returned to his boat, although the red wine consumption was somewhat reduced.

Eventually age took its toll, and Derek decided living on a boat with only a small solid fuel stove for heating, humping gas cylinders and coal bags about, taking his toilet cassette down to the services block next to The Shroppie Fly, and walking across the lock gates to get to the towpath in all weathers, was not sensible for a 80+ year-old. The villagers took him to their heart and in 2021 a bed-sit was found for him in Cheshire Street.

So Wylo had to go: again the boaters rallied round and helped him put it up for sale. It quickly found a cash buyer. Derek headed to the Post Office to pay in his proceeds of several thousand pounds in notes. As a loyal customer, he was definitely not impressed that the deposit was refused! So it was off to his Chester bank on the bus with an extremely valuable carrier bag with a friend riding shotgun, convinced he was going to be mugged!

Surprisingly, he thoroughly enjoyed being “on the land”, with luxuries such as a hot shower, a microwave, fridge and a washing machine. However, the TV was consigned to the corner like a naughty schoolboy! And getting to the post office, Judy’s paper shop, the Co-op and the chippie was oh-so-easy compared to the old days.

Derek’s health eventually failed and he died in Corbrook Court in November after a short illness. Cantankerous to the end, he was convinced they were trying to kill him with the wholesome food he was offered!

Derek leaves a son, Andrew, and a grand-daughter Medb, and a host of friends in the village.

His ashes will be scattered into the canal, probably against all regulations. Just as Derek would have wanted it!

As they would say on Tyneside, “farewell canny lad”.

Dave Martin