

My Mate Steve Payne

We are all gathered here today because we've lost someone who was a dear friend, husband, father and grandfather. This is something that hurts us all and none of us can see any fairness in our losing Steve but, however grudgingly, we must accept it. We all loved Steve and believe me, that's not something easy for a Scotsman to say, especially about another man.

However, we have to move on with life and Steve himself would not want us to spend today full of bitterness and regret. When he told me he was going to have a plot at St Mary's, we talked about what he wanted when the time finally came to use it. He hoped that the day would be one where we could think about him and tell a few stories about him and have a few laughs along the way.

The most important people in Steve's life were Sal, Emma and Hannah. I can remember badgering him for years to marry Sal and I asked him why he hadn't proposed previously. He said they were happy as they were but I'm sure there was always a bit of fear at the back of his mind that she might say "no" to him having waited so long for the proposal. I was eventually overjoyed to receive a message with a photo attachment from him taken on the day they got married at St Mary's and he explained that the wedding was carried out the way he wanted, with only the four of them, the way it had always been.

It was always good to be in Steve's company and I was lucky enough to know him through mutual friends, Rotary and the North Stifford Allotment Association. He was always a squash fanatic and excellent player who eventually became an Essex coach. He took all his games seriously and, if he could have, he would have played full contact squash. When he had joint problems, he must have scared the opposition shitless when he wandered into the court with knee braces and bandages on elbows and wrists. They probably thought they were going to play some cyborg opponent.

Steve was an excellent Rotarian who was President of the Rotary Club of Grays Thurrock and he was also a Paul Harris Fellow. This is the highest honour that Rotary bestows on one of its members and it was very well deserved. During his time in Rotary he was involved in organising Rotary KidsOut which involved taking students from Treetops School down to Adventure Island in Southend for a day and he also helped on various different committees within the Club.

His most memorable feat was to build the Club a new Christmas Sleigh. I know I was not alone in offering him help with this as he was doing the work at his home but, Mr Perfectionist didn't want any help with this at all. Probably because he realised that the more people were involved in this, the more

ridiculous would be the suggestions from others. As always, Steve had his own idea about the sleigh. There was to be only one idea and, as always, he was right. Letting him carry on with this alone was the right thing to do although I did bring the Club's attention to the fact that letting someone who was colour blind paint the sleigh might not be the right idea. Luckily he managed to differentiate red from green and we have an excellent sleigh without which we would not be able to raise the thousands of pounds we do for childrens' charities at Christmas. He used to tow the sleigh for us as well but I think that was mainly because it was warmer and dryer in the driving seat than walking along the streets. For this, he used his trusty Land Rover Defender. This was a present to himself at the end of lockdown and it was a vast improvement on the previous one he had owned which some of us christened the "Pimpmobile"

Steve was also a stalwart at the allotment and would help people if they needed it and used to join in with the rest of us when Eric's Café was running. He took an interest in the food but could never get the hang of washing the dishes afterwards. He said, but never to the face of the female attendees, that "doing dishes is woman's work" and he claimed that they always let him off with the dishes "because they're all in love with me" My reply was that he was "mutton dressed up as ram". He won the award for Best Allotment and constructed the first successful polytunnel on site. I'm sure he thought he had red fingers.

Any man who builds three houses for himself can't be entirely clueless but he let himself down with his greenhouse. He was laying the bricks for the support one Saturday morning and he was surprised when I offered to knock up the muck for him. He squirted Fairly liquid onto the mix and gave me the look meaning "please, please ask me my I did that". He was devastated when I said "I see we're using poor man's plasticiser". I told him that I thought he was a half bat short in the length of the sides but he refused point blank to re-measure as he knew what he was doing. Oh how we laughed on Sunday morning when we lifted the frame onto the base. You've guessed it – he was a half bat short.

Stephanie enjoyed a good laugh about things in general but he could also have a laugh at his own expense. He was also much braver than me and this was never more obvious than one summer's day when he walked down the lane onto the allotment. I could not believe my eyes. Sal had cut down a pair of his old Levis for him. Now we all know that fashion and couture is Sal's thing but you went badly wrong there, girl. These cut downs were so short that even the "Cheeky Girls" would have considered them obscene. The bravery becomes apparent due to the fact that he had walked along the High Road wearing them. I could never figure out how he could have worn these shorts that day when he had admitted to me that he had been embarrassed having a conversation with his daughters

about the fit of his underwear. The only other similar photograph I have that would shock people is one of the “Wham Sisters” as I called them. This is Stephanie and Peter Hoche as teenagers in their little white shorts trying to decide who was George Michael and who was Andrew Ridgley. Still undecided I believe. Even now I still can’t hear Last Christmas without thinking of Steve and Hochey.

Most of us have sheds on the allotment but we would often sit on the deck of the castle which Steve had built there. We would talk about how things were progressing with his treatment and I was genuinely surprised how quickly he had learned about his illness and the depth of knowledge he had of it. One thing I can state without fear of contradiction is that he dealt with the whole situation calmly, logically and fearlessly and this was greatly due to the help and support offered by his friends Kevin Watkins and Peter Hoche. Please be assured that he was always grateful for that support.

Christians believe in the Resurrection and other religions believe in rebirth. My own personal belief is that people will be reborn every time we spend a few moments thinking of them. As far as I’m concerned, Steve is just out of view at present but I know that I will see him often as time goes on and I’m sure that you all will too. Our worlds and lives have all been better for having you in them, mate.