

Derek Woodley
Natural Storyteller and Editor of the Stone Pickers Weekly
Born 16th June 1932 – died 15 August 2012
Eulogy by Neil Lanham for funeral on 5th September at The United
Reform Church, Castle Camps, Cambs

I feel very proud that Violet has asked me to say a few words in honour of Derek whose life we are here to celebrate for although I have known of him for the best part of 50 years it was only during the last twenty, when he moved opposite us, that I got to know him well. I saw in him a strong contented personality, who had a rare satisfaction of life and understanding of his position there in also a wry sense of humour that is only found in a good old Suffolk boy and that is something that I have always admired. He brightened every minute that I was with him and he reminded me of my Uncle Tickles for when he knew that I was interested in the old culture he put the word bor on the end of everything he said.

When I was a boy growing up in the late 1940s there was a song that used to come on the Radio, or the wireless as we called it then called 'The Jimmy Brown Song' and this song was about a boy born in a village and later meets his wife to be and is married there where he works and eventually dies in the same village. It was lovely and the beauty of the song was in the idyllic life that Jimmy had led in living in this small environment, enjoying his home and the surroundings of a natural life. Well, it strikes me that such a life was similarly enjoyed here in Helions and Camps by Derek. For Crusty, as we all knew him, was born at Little Bulls Bridge, walked to School in Castle Camps and spent virtually his whole life working for one farmer here in Camps. There was a French anthropologist by the name of Claude Levi-Strauss who said words to the effect that in spite of all the people who want to go round the world to view all these wonderful far-off places, the winner is he who stays at home because he has a greater identity of home, an inherited sense of who he is from his position in his community and the people around him whose company he loves and an inbuilt understanding of his own culture and historic tradition that he thrives in. This brings a contentment of mind that the globe trotter and displaced can never ever acquire or possibly even understand, and such a life, I believe, was led here by Crusty.

Derek was born on 16th June 1932 the middle one of a family of five children and times were very hard. At school in the war years they did not do many proper lessons, children instead kept pigs and worked the allotment. Yet in spite of a lack of schooling Derek was as literate as he

need be in all things. When he was about 11 he got a certificate from the school so that he could have time off to help look after Tom Haylock's horses at Park Farm. Here he earned half a crown a week out of which he gave his mother a shilling toward the housekeeping. When he left school he first started at Haywards Garage in Haverhill but yearned for life on the land and after a month or so Roy Haylock offered him a job at Lordships Farm and there he stayed until almost his 80th year.

In 1954 on a trip with the lads to 'The Pictures' at Saffron Walden, Derek met Violet. He was handsome and gorgeous she tells me but she soon found out about his wicked sense of humour and that he was a constant leg-pull and would wind people up for the fun of it. He was nevertheless generous and kind. If there was a wrong to be righted Derek would be there to do it and he would always support the underdog. He never lost his temper, not least at home she tells us and he loved animals particularly his dog Jesse who misses him like we do. Violet and Derek brought one another a deep spiritual contentment and a lasting happiness.

In 1957 came Derek's proudest day when Violet gave birth to their only child Jackalyn and his grand children Avril, Derek and Dawn are here today. Derek would tell them, stories of his own making, which included another little imaginary boy called Derek who would play with their toys when they weren't there. This was Derek's way of carrying the old ways of passing wisdom through story – through his own self composed stories. Stories store bought in books are unnecessary to people with the natural gifts that Derek possessed. If the children got hurt there would always be some 'magic' water to cure the pain – out of the water butt!

In 1990 after much difficulty in obtaining planning permission for which they lobbied many local people, they built their Bungalow at Drapers Green. Of an evening Derek would sit on the step of his old Shepherds hut eating an apple off his shut-knife, as countrymen have done since time immemorial and look back with pride at his residence. He called the Shepherds Hut as one might guess Dun Roman.

Violet and Derek enjoyed being part of their local community and for many years Derek played cricket in the Helions team.

But it was down in The Three Horse Shoes that Derek's inherited culture really came to the fore. He told how, in the old days, the old uns sat round the table in the centre of the bar room proliferating stories new and old and the young men would lean against the walls listening and only joining in when they were asked. He told of how they used to sing and

pass the communal pot round. He revelled in it and when I moved here in the late 1960s there would be Derek, Ted and Albert Andrews, Jimmy Sorrell, Peter Blake, Dimmock, Snowy, all encouraged by PC Ken Marks to keep the stories going and if you went in you can bet you'd be caught in a tall story wind up probably by Derek or Jack Wright. 'Did yer see the man from Concord last week, Mr Lanham, he was asking for me by name he wanted to buy one of my marrows to house Concord in'. And when I asked about buying a hundredweight of potatoes he said 'I'll never cut one of my potatoes in half for anyone'. They say that if you want to find a fool in Suffolk you have got to bring him there.

This manifested in a liars contest one night. Jack Wright reckoned that there were 2 ducks that flew over his garden every night about tea time and he never had time to get in to get his gun so this night he left it loaded and ran in the house when he saw them coming just in time to fire both barrels up the chimney 'got both on em' he said 'and one fell on a partridge so I got that as well. It was my lucky day'. Siddall Germany won though he reckoned that he was a pheasant short of his order of four brace for Walden but as he was driving his car along on the top of Boblow hill he saw a pheasant flying towards the road so he wound a back window down then accelerated at the last minute and the pheasant flew straight into the car so he killed it, plucked and dressed it and that made up the number.

Crusty reckoned that there was a copper who was after Siddall as he was a bit of a poacher and banged on his door saying 'what you got a stewing in that pot, Siddall' as it smelt like pheasant. 'Rabbit' said Siddall. 'If that's Rabbit said the copper 'you'll show me the skin'. 'Can't' said Siddall in a flash 'we ate that first'.

And these stories were repeated when out brushing with the guns or turkey plucking where he would keep the assembled company alive with stories. When Mr Stevens got the Whiskey bottle out after one plucking session Crusty got so inebriated that he reckoned that Violet took his money off him when he got home so he never did know how much he earned. And when he got his camouflage jacket he reckoned that Roy couldn't find him when he brought his wages up on the Friday.

It was all relayed in the Stone Pickers Weekly, which was his name for the gossip and social news that gets passed on. This name, he said, came in to being when all the local women went to earn good money up at Castle Camps Aerodrome picking stones, when it was reclaimed after the war. There had never been a meeting of the clans like it and the gossip expounded and got exaggerated as it grew. Derek took great delight in his

unofficial position as the editor of this imaginary newspaper. Such an imagination can only come with a wholesome vision.

And what expressions and sayings he'd come out with. When Crusty came over he'd just as likely greet me saying 'sun shine both sides of the hedge this morning' or 'How's yer belly off for spots, bor' or he could come out with 'I was born too close to a wood to be frightened by an owl' It gave a metaphoric measurement on the situation in hand. If a man was standing with his legs splayed out he'd say 'he'd want an acre to thatch a stack' and an Abington man was a stout post for holding up a stack from falling down. George Ewart Evans, in his many books about the spoken word of Suffolk horsemen, said that such country people had a higher level of communication than the average academic speaker because their language was image forming and the mind needs pictures, names and identities. It passed both a measurement and a vision that is lost now.

It has been said that man was made to till the soil and that to work close to nature with one's hands is the most natural thing that a man can do. Derek fulfilled this both at work and home where he always had a well stocked garden which he farmed with a close eye using his knowledge of the weather and seasons. He did many good things regardless of money and always refused to say how much he wanted for a job of work. There was absolutely no clamour for riches or monetary wealth. He was never in a hurry and was always steady, never flurried and quietly as strong as an ox. These things are of course typical of the natural Suffolk character that Derek inherited and enjoyed to the full. I use the word Suffolk for people do not change according to a line drawn on a map – that is office thinking.

People talk of retirement but this is not a word in the vocabulary of those like Derek who have found their niche in life. Good work is good life. Good life is good work and Derek had found his. He carried on with the occupation that he loved in working the soil until well past his 79th birthday and regretted that he could not continue past his 80th. He had no thought at all of the word that others talk of which becomes a date that they cannot wait to reach, called retirement.

Derek was steeped in this sense of home and belonging, with his family around him and the local culture and tradition that he championed. It gave him a contentment and wholesome enjoyment of life that only such a natural existence can bring away from computer screens, sat navs and other modern artificial devices, that are false and have deviated the

modern mind into mere literal vision. To understand Derek is to understand what we are losing. Derek had a remarkable life, remarkable for its enviable simplicity and whole life involvement and everyday enjoyment. God bless you Derek, bor, for all that you brought us.