

Derek Rodman (Ridley, 1951 – 2022)

“I think you’ll find it’s your chain.”

“What?”

“I said, I think it’s your chain.”

We had been throbbing along in Gunnersbury on one of Derek’s many motorbikes, when it had come to an abrupt halt. Now, if anybody knew anything about motorbikes and cars, it was Derek and what he didn’t know, probably wasn’t worth knowing anyway. Being a polite and gentle soul, Derek carried on with his inspection, trying his best to ignore the old lady that had sidled up insisting that it was the chain, she did not take the hint.

“I’m telling you it’s the chain.”

Eventually in what was a fit of pique for Derek, he enquired, “Okay, how do you know it’s the chain?”

“Because I saw it flying off your motorbike and it’s lying in the middle of the road back there!” It was one of those moments that a camera would have been very handy, just to capture the look on Derek’s face.

This was sometime in the 1970s, but I had met Derek in 1965, at King Edward’s School in Witley, Surrey. He was in the same year as me, along with Pete A., Richard R. and Steve P., who sadly left us a few years ago. The co-educational school is set in stunning Surrey countryside, and we grew up together over a fabulous five-year period of our lives. Derek was always full of energy and Chris King remembers him being ‘a star cross-country runner’. Alan Whitlow recalls that he was ‘a respected and positive influence during his time at KESW’.

Ironically, when Cathy asked me to talk about the school years, I realised that although Derek and I had studied Geography and Geology together, we were Prefects and in the Hockey 1st XI, with him on the right wing, me on the left and Pete at centre forward, it was actually after school that we became really good friends. True, he used to come and stay at my mum’s flat in the holidays, along with all the others and that strengthened the bonds between us.

But it was in the period around 1970-72, when I returned from one of my hitchhiking trips around Europe, that I found him staying with my mum and we had no choice but to become really good friends, after all, he was sleeping in my bed, luckily there were two beds! Over that period, something really clicked between us. I had taken two years off in between school and college, to work and travel, he had gone to Brunel University. I was earning, he wasn’t, so I paid for all the drinks; something he never forgot later, when the roles were reversed.

In 1974, he helped me get my first motorbike, a BSA Bantam, and spent a whole evening coaching me, as I prepared for my first solo long journey from Chiswick to Winchester. I set off at dawn, to avoid the traffic, and got somewhere near Virginia Water, when the bike stopped. I had no idea what was wrong, so I panicked. Luckily there was a phone box nearby and in no time at all Derek was with me. Having been unable to solve the problem over the phone, he had driven all the way from Chiswick. He poked and prodded and then, without any frustration or irritation said, “Tell

you what Ken, why don't we push the bike to that garage over there. You'll find it runs a lot better with some petrol in it!" If only he had had a camera!

Then there was the golden period of Winchester Weekends, courtesy of Michael Morris, where us boys were joined by Su, Sally, Peggy, Kim, Ruth and Nicky. Bonds of friendship were constantly being reinforced, mostly at the King Alfred pub. The regular gatherings have continued to this day at Lockerley, courtesy of Pete & Su with Sandra, another Peter and our numerous offspring joining the merry band. Derek and Cathy were obviously delighted by the arrival of their son, Ben.

Motorbikes played a big part in our lives. I remember Derek showing off his new helmet. To prove its strength, he dived over a low wall, head first; luckily his head stayed in one piece, the helmet didn't. I eventually got a 1961 BSA Gold Flash, it was a 650, like his 1951 BSA Goldstar, except mine had suspension; several rides on his Goldstar had impressed upon me the importance of proper suspension! He loved taking things apart, so that he could put them back together again. Inevitably there was the infamous box of leftover bits; he would look at them, scratch his head and then tuck them away somewhere; secure in the knowledge that, if the machine worked without those bits, they couldn't be that important anyway.

In 1977 he was my best man before Ruth and I set off for Australia after our wedding. I left my Gold Flash with him. We returned, unexpectedly in 1978 to find him on our doorstep with a load of boxes.

"I heard you were back, so I thought I had better return your motorbike."

"Derek, it's in boxes!"

"I know. I was going to rebuild it for you as a surprise, but you came back early and I met someone and I've been a bit busy." That someone, was Cathy.

In 1979, he stayed with us in Southampton before his wedding to Cathy. He desperately wanted a stag do, but we were under strict orders. As luck would have it, my office had organised a river boat shuffle around the Isle of Wight with music and booze, the night before the wedding; what could possibly go wrong? We did ponder that question as we sat moored off Yarmouth very late that night, because a thick fog had descended and the skipper was considering harbouring there overnight; luckily for us, the fog lifted.

Derek had wanted me to be his best man, but quite rightly the honour fell to his older brother Allan. At the wedding, as we were gathered outside the church, Derek sidled up to me and said, "Ken, fancy being my best man, in fact, fancy being my family." The family had not allowed for the infamous Hockley lights at Winchester and were stuck somewhere on what would eventually become the M3. Just as Derek and Cathy had said their vows, a family entered the church. The delighted vicar got them to repeat their vows, whereupon the embarrassed family left the church, having realised they were at the wrong wedding. Derek later joked that he loved Cathy so much, he married her twice!

After the wedding ceremony I organised lifts for everyone back to the reception, rather efficiently I thought, until a car pulled up, driven by one of Derek's friends who explained that Derek had figured I had forgotten about a lift for myself. Even on his wedding day, he was thinking of others.

Derek's family used to have a Jack Russell, Jackson. He was friendly, loyal, full of energy and bounced everywhere, a bit like Derek really.

The most common memories of Derek, from people at school were of a nice, kind, generous, lovely person who always put others first. Pete once commented on how much he was enjoying listening to a cassette of *Dark Side of the Moon* in one of Derek's cars; when it finished, Derek handed the cassette to Pete, as he had another one somewhere; generous as ever. Maggie remembers calling him when she was being terrorised by a mouse; Derek naturally rushed over and sorted it without any fuss.

Thankfully Ruth and I had a few lovely days staying with Derek and Cathy in July 2021, just after my 70th at Pete & Su's; it was the last time we saw him in 3D. I recently had a long phone conversation with him, a week or so before he left us. He was almost his usual chirpy self. Cathy was out in the garden, so I asked him to tell me the truth. He was looking forward to seeing his consultant, just in case there was news on a new drug for his lung cancer, but he knew his time was coming. His major concern was that he didn't want to be a burden for Cathy and Ben and he certainly didn't want them to become his carers; typical Derek, thinking of others, right to the end.

Goodbye old friend, thanks for almost 60 years of friendship, memories, fun and laughter and I forgive you for the Gold Flash!

Written by Ken Humphrey (Grafton, 1970)

