

Tributes to John Lister read at his funeral on 6th May 2017

Tribute to John from his Brother and Sisters, 6th May 2017

John grew up as the youngest of four children, he was our little brother, our sister Elizabeth did not put in an appearance until much later and although she became the baby of the family John remained our little brother. Although for quite some time the three of us did have John believing he had been found under a gooseberry bush, and that we took pity on him and let him be our brother.

Our upbringing in the 1950's was in the NE town of West Hartlepool, and as youngsters we played together on the street and in the local parks, John was always a happy little boy. He could easily be reduced to fits of giggles by the silliest of remarks, or failing that just tickling.

When asking my sisters for memories of John, the most common feature was of spending time together as a family, on the local beaches, on the farm in Swaledale where we had many a holiday.

The holidays on the farm were just for a week, this was the annual holiday entitlement then, and the week was packed with walking, playing in the river and streams, exploring the old lead mines visiting many a ruined abbey or castle, the dark garde-robe chambers seemed to have been a fascinating attraction. Anne especially recalls the walks over to the pub (the Red Lion) in the next dale, although we children had to sit on the wall outside, whilst our parents were inside having a drink. So you can see that Johns' affinity with mines, dark holes, walking and pubs came from an early age.

Later when we had become 5 children and had moved down to Whitton outside of London, the balance changed, Anne and Barbara were older and Elizabeth had two brothers to play with. We were very good, we allowed her to join in, but she always blamed John and I for dislocating her shoulder tying her up in the apple tree playing cowboys and indians. She says this led her to a career in physio, if so, she managed to get her revenge on John when she prodded and manipulated him after he had injured himself.

I remember John as my playmate, we always shared a bedroom, the smallest in the house, the girls had the large room, even when there were only two. We did not always want to play with big sisters, so often went off to explore and play, we were in scouts together. However, eventually we went our separate ways, I went to university and by the time I had finished, John had also left home to go to university. He did come back to be best man at my wedding and there is a photo at the Neuadd, please don't laugh.

Barbara, recalls meeting John, by chance in a pub one time, He was of course underage and he looked at her like a deer caught in the headlights. She asked if he would like a drink!

Elizabeth remained close to John, they being the two youngest, John was such a caring loving brother to her, so much that when she had the mumps he thought he would cheer her up, so he wrapped a scarf round her swollen neck and they went on the bus to the cinema to see the jungle book Mum was mortified on their return, this closeness continued into adult hood and Elizabeth recalls many happy times here in the Elan valley when their families were growing up.

Family remained important to John, during his round the world trip, our sister Barbara and family, came over from America, and there was to be a family Christmas and our mother wished that John could also be there, and unknown to her John made a surprise visit home to be with us all for Christmas.

Later on during many a family get together John was always the life and soul of the party with his refined dress sense, shorts and sandals! stories and impish sense of humour.

On behalf of Anne, Barbara, Elizabeth and myself thank you John for being our little brother.

David Lister

Tribute to John from John Harvey, friend and workmate.

I'm John Harvey and these are some of the mining stories that John enjoyed telling.

I first met him at the South Wales Caving Club in 1974. I'd left the coal mining industry after 10 years but he was about to enter the mining world. He graduated from Cardiff University and we often talked about how he started in this toughest of industries. He went for a job in the Wheal Jane tin mine in Cornwall and was interviewed by the Mine Manager and Mine Captain. When asked his qualifications he said proudly "I've got an Honours Degree in mining from Cardiff University. The Manager turned to the Captain and said "what do you think of that Bill? He replied Ah- educationally perfect, practically fucking useless." Nevertheless he was hired and given the menial but vital task of cleaning out the underground mine gutters. He persevered and was trained and promoted through the ranks as a drilling crewmember and eventually a shift boss and mine captain at Mt Wellington mine. It was in these mines that he met Peter Anstice who is here today.

In about 1986 after years of economic difficulty, tin mining in Cornwall finally came to an end. John rang me to say that there was a lot of mining kit going for scrap. He thought it would be useful for our projects and we met at the Bridgewater Service

Station on the M5. He arrived in his estate car full of pumps, fans, drills and picks. We piled it into my minivan and I drove back to the Forest of Dean, slowly and in 3rd gear.

Radon was an issue in caves and mines, and in 1989 Ashford Price of Dan Yr Ogof Show Caves asked us to improve the ventilation in the main tourist cave. We drove a ventilation tunnel to connect with a higher-level passage some 40m inside the cave entrance and installed a large forcing fan to keep the tourist part of the cave ventilated with fresh air. It was a simple tunnelling operation of drill and blast then mucking out with shovels to wheelbarrows and thence to a dumper bucket. The drivage was completed after a few weeks, and we installed a 3ft diameter steel pipe in the more unstable part of the tunnel, built retaining walls at the pipe ends and filled around it with foamed concrete- possibly the first time that it had been used in mine work. The ventilation system worked well and the radon risk in the tourist cave was minimised.

The following years saw us again on structural work at the caves mainly on the entrances. In 1991 we rebuilt the portal at Bone Cave. We carried tons of blocks and steelwork up a steep winding track through the dinosaur park, accompanied by the endless taped commentary that told us that "back in the mists of time there was a strange breed of animals called dinosaurs-some were large ---- but some were as small as chickens". By the end of the project, the crew took to squawking every time chickens were mentioned, much to the amazement of visitors to the caves.

In 1993 John investigated a hole at the Smith Kline Beecham factory in the Forest of Dean. They were the manufacturers of Ribena and many other drinks. Builders digging a drain had broken into old iron mine workings. A quick fix was needed so that the blackcurrant pressing could start the following week. John supervised the installation of concrete pillars under the presses to support the 3m of broken roof between them and the mine void. Major work to stabilise the remaining workings started the following year and the site engineer was Peter--John's friend from Cornwall. John was appointed mine manager and between them they established a system where foamed concrete was pumped into the convoluted mine workings through 4-inch diameter plastic pipes. Installing the pipes was a major task as they were supplied in unmanageable, large diameter rolls but with steam from the factory boilers blown through them for a time, they resembled hot blue snakes about 40 m long, lying flat on the ground. We quickly installed them into the high places of the mine and pumped commenced. It was here that we first met Tony Forster, the mines Inspector, who is here today

It was around 1996 that there was a collapse of the surface into an ancient unrecorded iron mineshaft adjacent to a house in the Forest of Dean. First job - remove house owner's car from the shaft, then shore up adjacent buildings and finally plug fill the top 10m of the shaft with reinforced concrete.

In 1996 another surface collapse occurred adjacent to a bungalow at the head of a steep decline into old iron mines in the village of Bream in the Dean. Cavers had reported that the only support to the bungalow appeared to be a Victorian rubbish tip and a Belfast sink! A temporary fix was made and major mine stabilisation works started to preserve the road and village. John and Peter managed the project and they commissioned both ecological and archaeological surveys before work started. The most remarkable find unearthed was thought to be some arcane mining device used by the old miners but proved to be the remnants of a large, inflatable female doll!

John was also appointed Manager of the Dudley Stone mines stabilisation project that was already underway. It was thought that a mining engineer at the helm would assist matters. John often said that he relished the look on the Inspector's face when, before he started an inspection he was given a buoyancy aid to wear, before journeying through the mine in a battery powered boat, steered by John.

In early 2000 Brian McConnell of Hydrock asked whether we could give some time to a mining project at the Combe Down Mines in Bath. These were old, near surface limestone mines covering about 50 acres and in imminent danger of collapse. The project would initially be for 6 months, but it took ten years to complete, after many hundreds of thousands of cubic metres of foamed concrete and thousands of tons of steel, timber and stone was used to secure the mine. John and I shared the position of mine manager and many folk here today were part of the Project.

John managed many other mining jobs. He helped with the certification of a barytes mine in Scotland for ISO 9000 status, and in the Forest of Dean re-lining a mineshaft leading to a bat habitat and visited others in Greece and in Costa Rica with Brian. When I asked John what conditions were like in the last two mines, he said with a smile "just like Cornwall in the 70's". So 40 years on and the wheel turns full circle.

John Harvey

Tribute to John from Fred Levett on behalf of the Club and Rescue

I am privileged to speak as John's friend and for all his friends in the South Wales Caving Club, the South and Mid Wales Cave Rescue Team and other surrounding teams, his 'second family' as John put it. Many are here today.

Sandals, shorts, tee shirt, beard, and in the early days a pipe (or cigar for high-days and holidays!). I would exaggerate if I said he cut a dashing figure, but you knew when John was about. He had a sense of humour that sort of leaked out of him, a kind of mischievous inner man. He loved a good story, a practical joke, a prank. Many a caver has carried a rock all day in his or her tackle sack unbeknown to them. He could take a joke but had a long memory; perpetrators would live on high alert for months waiting for retribution.

John knew his subject, on caves and mines he was a true expert. To visit a disused mine with John was a magical experience. He could explain how the mine had been worked and why, what the workers would have faced and how they dealt with it. This knowledge was of vital importance to the rescue team. He also knew how to impart knowledge. He did not have to be top-dog. People listened to him because he made sense and as the years went by increasingly went to him for advice on a whole range of matters. Cavers can be a pretty noisy lot, each with a point of view, and determined to express it. If John had something to say others would fall silent such was the respect for him.

Immensely practical he could turn his hand to any on-going Club project, and loved the camaraderie as roofs were fixed, doors installed, damage repaired and explorations requiring his special expertise pursued; and perhaps the odd beer and whisky drunk. He had time for all regardless of circumstance, a popular member for over 40 years.

Although he did not need to be seen as top dog he would take high rank if he thought it was needed. He was Chairman of the Club for 3 years from 1987, and Chairman of the then West Brecon rescue team in 2000, moving over to be Secretary of the South Wales Cave Rescue Organisation in 2001. These were not jobs for the faint-hearted demanding a sureness of purpose, diplomacy and sometimes plain speaking. His long and dedicated service was recognised by the British Cave Rescue Council and he was awarded the Queen's Golden and Diamond Jubilee medals. This was not the only official recognition he received. Fighting to control a heavily loaded rescue Landover enroute to a rescue at Otter Hole (the entrance to which is guarded by a tidal sump) attracted a speeding ticket, subsequently revoked!

There were 2 roles he really valued. Selected by his peers he served from 1991 as a Warden for the rescue team. For those not familiar with rescue terminology, this is not some kind of gaoler, but a person who is the gateway to cave rescue services. A call for help, often relayed via the police will start with a phone call. Sounds pretty easy – you wait weeks or maybe months for a call and then take a few details. What a warden does next is a major determinant of the outcome for that casualty. Sometimes life or death. The right expertise must be called out in the right numbers with the right kit to get the job started, it's vital you know what you are doing. He only stood down when he became ill. From 1996 he was elected a trustee for the South Wales Caving Club and with that a vice presidency, his attention to detail, his memory, fairness and balanced judgement made him a go to person. He fulfilled his obligations to the end.

When John knew he was ill with characteristic openness and honesty he told his friends. A member of the Club in difficulties need never stand alone; if a caver in trouble reaches out to the rescue team they will not turn away. John found this support immensely valuable through his illness. He did not become isolated; indeed

he continued serving both the Club and team as trustee and executive member respectively. He was both brave and determined. We were not surprised.

John was a quick thinker when action was needed, and could keep thinking in a crisis. We set off in an inflatable rubber dingy to cross a lake in a flooded mine. Halfway across it was clear that the heavily loaded dingy was leaking. A quick mental calculation – yes we had enough time to reach the side. Then we became entangled in a mass of thin cord and stopped, slowly sinking. In a flash John took his Swiss Army knife out and started slashing at the tangled mess. Alarmed I shouted “John – be careful – mind the dingy”. “Don’t worry Fred” he said in that soft West Hartlepool accent, “We are going to drown anyway”. His humour always shone through.

In a cold, dark cave or mine, when a difficult decision has to be taken I am sure that if you focus your mind you will hear John’s clear practical advice, and it will be right.

Your second family will not forget.

Fred Levett