

## **Bert Worman 1928 – 2009**

Good afternoon. We are celebrating the life of Bert Worman who came to live in Divinity Road 22 years ago. Since he has died in his eighty-first year there must be many people with memories of this lovable, interesting man, never short of stories and opinions. He often talked about his life. Talking about our life story helps make us the people we are, reflect on our life, and form the way we see ourselves and others see us.

Bert was born into a poor family in the East End, and his father left them when he was a young boy. His Irish granny influenced him greatly. He grew up in the shadow of an asbestos factory, and played in asbestos dust in the streets; even in their homes the children breathed in more of the dust, brought in on the clothes of their elders. Many of his relatives died of asbestosis in their 30s & 40s. He was to survive that but added further risk to his lungs by smoking from an early age. He told stories of the Blitz, catastrophic for the East End, and another cause of dangerous dust. On one occasion an unexploded bomb landed in the street outside his house and after first refusing to believe it, the family went out to look and shot back through their house across the yard to warn the people next door and in the houses behind theirs to get out fast. As a boy he trained as a butcher and claimed that he remained an expert.

His national service was spent in the army as a truck driver in Berlin in 1945 and 1946 just after the war ended. Bert was appalled by the starvation and suffering he witnessed among the women and children – also by the callous way some of our people treated them. Bert adored young children and found their plight particularly hard. He was in Berlin too during the Russian blockade and helped the Americans distribute the food that they airlifted into the city. He learned to speak some German and made friends among the people.

The happiest time of his life came when, married and with a family, he worked as a general handyman decorator and lived in a tied cottage on Lord Esher's estate at Watlington. It was not to last. His marriage broke down and family life ended for him. This led to his leaving the cottage and the job he loved, and he began to go downhill, spending two years as a homeless man on the streets of Oxford, scavenging for food and sleeping in hidden corners of the car factory. Gradually he put his life together again and found employment in the paint shop in Cowley – a further risk to his lungs – and he became an efficient tradesman, no longer homeless or friendless, and he settled in East Oxford. After retiring from the car works he came to live in Divinity Road in 1987. It is a tribute to him that he survived in a student house for 22 years, for students vary greatly. It is difficult enough to survive in Divinity Road without any students in your house, but Bert coped with them all, not always that easily. Fortunately, the last group he shared the house with were particularly nice and looked out for him. It was they who discovered him dead on his bed.

After he left the factory, working on many houses in the Divinity Road area through his 60s and well into his 70s he made his living by painting and decorating, ready despite his age to climb up to paint the windows of tall houses, always a little anxious whether or when his next job would appear. Otherwise how would he get his cigarettes? His needs were simple but his need for nicotine seemed infinite. But he should not have worried about getting orders, as his work was very good and his prices fair.

He made friends and acquaintances through this work but far more friends down in his home-from-home, the Excelsior café where he enjoyed the atmosphere and the people he met there – as he did in Stepping Stones where later he went for his midday meal. He lived in a room which contained all he had in the world, a room which he had transformed into his stylish version of an 18<sup>th</sup> century drawing room. His years of working in the stately homes of South Oxfordshire had given him a confidence in his own taste that nothing would shake. He would sometimes argue with customers about the aesthetics of the colours they had chosen. Something of an artist he loved to draw and design – at the back of the house the garden he filled with geraniums and set off by the pond he made were impressive and a pleasure. He loved opera and poetry and talk. He would talk to anyone, though he was a bit impatient with people who he thought lacked common sense. In the evenings he would sit out on the front garden wall smoking and engaging in banter or gossip or long conversations with many passersby.

As he grew older and less enthusiastic about work, his next door neighbour realised that he was receiving no benefits, discovering incidentally that Bert could not read, something he never admitted. It explains quite a lot about his reserve. To his relief Belinda helped him obtain the benefits he was entitled to. He was amazed at how much he could save, as his needs were few. The benefits freed him to retire finally from the paint, the cold and the toil.

Bert's life made him a thoughtful man, a pessimistic philosopher, aghast at the stupidity of mankind with our addictions to wars and crazy over-consumption and our lack of self-discipline, including in his judgement his regret at his own inability to stop smoking. On the other hand, his life-long near teetotalism was a key to his survival on the street, and his defeat of the depression that descended on him when his marriage failed and he lost his family.

In a difficult old age he seldom complained and was always surprised and pleased by the caring concern for him of his mates in Excelsior and the people in Stepping Stones and of his neighbours. He was our own neighbourhood watch and looked after our houses and the spare keys of people off on holiday. As his lungs deteriorated he would go for appointments to the hospital which he hated because the central heating was a further scourge to his lungs which were deteriorating badly. His trips became shorter and he even stopped going to Stepping Stones for his meals. His walks to the Excelsior twice a day were epic journeys. It was painful to watch. He would walk thirty yards then stop to lean on a wall to catch his breath. Sometimes at the end of the breather he'd light up

another cigarette or even strike up another conversation with a passerby. In this last year he was persuaded to buy a motorised wheel chair which transformed his life. He loved that wheelchair and was able to return again to the Stepping Stones for his lunch and to scoot up and down Divinity Road with ease and unconcealed delight.

Bert lived in interesting times and was invited to talk to primary school children about his life. He loved children, gave them presents and even allowed one of them to drive him in his motorised chair. A compassionate man full of good humour and strong views he was grateful for his life and the friendships that it brought him. The range of his friendships is obvious in the large attendance here. He has left a gap in the life of this local community, and will be greatly missed by many people.

*(Address by John Prangle of Divinity Road, at Bert's funeral at SS Mary & John Church, Cowley Road)*