

## **EULOGY FOR GORDON    29<sup>th</sup> November 2021**

There are few people like Gordon. He lived out the Young Farmers' motto – to be a good farmer, good countryman, good citizen. He was a loving family man and friend to many people. We are all blessed to have had him in our lives.

Gordon was born at Uldale, in north Cumbria to Joe and Doris Wilkinson on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 1930.

You may have noticed, over the past 91 years, that he had a double, his twin brother, Donald.

Once, in their childhood, on a Sunday School trip to Morecambe, Gordon wandered off and disappeared. His mother reported it to the police. When the policeman asked, 'And what does he look like?' she pointed to Donald: 'Like this one,' she said.

Their early years were spent at Grassthwaite How, Patterdale, playing up at Lanty's Tarn, catching trout in Grisedale Beck, roaming woods, building huts and doing things most country lads did.

For holidays they went to Grandma James, where Uncles Tom and Norman taught them to catch rabbits with ferrets. Or, they would help Granddad Wilkinson, at Deepdale Hall, with haymaking, using little rakes or up on the mew in the barn. The reward was half a crown to be spent at Patterdale Sheepdog Trials where the twins made a beeline for the ice-cream van that was making a rare appearance in the area.

Sometimes they did things they shouldn't, such as messing about with pals on the boats at Glenridding. One day, they both fell in the lake and knew they would get a scolding from their mother. They tried to dry out but red dye had seeped from their braces into their shirts, so they confessed all.

Gordon's father was Whipper-in for the Ullswater foxhounds and they lived at the kennels, next door to the legendary Joe "Hunty" Bowman. The twins often followed the hunt, if it was local, and hunting remained a way of life for Gordon. His passion for country sports never faltered. He supported the hounds, organizing hunt balls, where he and Elsie enjoyed old tyme dancing, and hunt suppers where Gordon would sing.

Jean remembers days when they drove to Carlisle to collect wintering hogs, or up to Hexham for a tup, they would sing all the way there and all the way back. Gordon had quite a repertoire but his favourite was "These are my Mountains."

In 1940 the family loaded up a flat-bed trailer with all their belongings, including caged hens and dogs, and journeyed west to Black How Farm, Cleator. Gordon's father was employed as a shepherd and, as well as helping his dad with the sheep, Gordon enjoyed time with the horseman who always had a box of Mars Bars on the go.

In winter the twins ice-skated on Broken Lands, an area where old mine shafts had sunk and filled with water, and in summer they'd walk seven miles to an open-air swimming pool on the beach at St. Bees, where they'd gather covens (periwinkles) to cook and eat.

Four years later, they moved to Far Mountbarrow farm, near Ulverston, which was owned by Matt Hutchinson, or Boss.

Gordon and Donald were in school but keen to be on the farm, where they kept ferrets, rabbits, bantams, and buff rocks, and where they trapped moles to sell the skins for fivepence apiece. During the war, there was a scheme that allowed them to take time off school to thin turnips. This provided them with much needed pocket money. When they left school, at fourteen, they worked for Boss.

Gordon loved working with the Clydesdale horses, especially breaking in the young ones. His favourites were Bobby and Charlie and together they chain

harrowed pastures, rolled cornfields and mowed grass. They started at dawn, while it was still cool, and Gordon's mother would bring breakfast out to the field.

Each year he helped Boss get horses ready for the 'horse and cart' class at North Lonsdale Show. Gordon's job was to walk the horses down to the blacksmith's on Brook Street, to have them shod. He'd wash them and plait coloured raffia through their manes and tails.

On VJ day in 1945, Boss asked Gordon to walk a horse back to Mountbarrow from Broughton in Furness. This was one of his most cherished memories. Most people had the day off and the roads were quiet, so it was just Boss, Gordon and the horse walking the peaceful country lanes.

On Gordon and Donald's 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, the Wilkinsons moved to Crosslands, Rusland. It was exciting. They were starting out on their very own farm with a few cows, some bits of farm machinery and, to Gordon's delight, his two favourite horses.

It was 1947, just after the war and Rusland was fairly isolated. There were no telephones, few cars, little money and no social life to speak of. Gordon set to with a few others and started a men's club in the Reading Rooms. This was somewhere to meet and play billiards, snooker, darts and dominoes.

When Gordon and Donald lived at Mountbarrow they'd been members of Furness Young Farmers' Club. Now, living at Crosslands, they cycled to Urswick or Ulverston for meetings. They decided to set up a club in Rusland. At the time there were thirty farms between Grizedale and Rusland and so there was lots of interest. Gordon was the first chairman and Elsie Jackson the first secretary and very soon they were going out together. All the social activities were based around the Young Farmers, and Gordon and Elsie worked well together, (7) organising club meetings, competitions and dances.

Gordon joined the committees of both Rusland Show and the Reading Rooms in the 1950s and he remained on them for 70 years. He was dedicated to both and was chairman of the show for 36 years. The show was his number one priority. From putting up marquees to entering competitions, there was nothing Gordon wouldn't do to make sure the show was a success. In his younger days he'd set off with aniseed soaked rags to lay the ten mile hound trail before running the fell race in the afternoon.

He was a fair, open and honest man which is perhaps why, over the years, he was elected chairman of a number of other committees. In the 1960s he and a few others set up the Furness Farming Club. Later he was invited by the Blue-faced Leicester Society to help form the North of England Mule Sheep Association and he became chairman of the Kendal branch. He had quite a task on to persuade Kendal auction to hold mule sales but he persevered and mule sales became the largest ones of the year. This was probably his greatest achievement, aside from his family, of course.

In 1993, along with Chris Benefield and Ken Lomas, he organised a Spring Show. It was to be a small affair, very local. It grew and has become one of the valley's most eagerly awaited events. For Gordon it was all about getting people together after winter.

The valley community was always in his heart, as it was with Elsie, and they shared the same dedication. However, Elsie was less than pleased when Gordon bought an ex council van, with orange light intact.

'It'll be reet,' said Gordon, 'the valley needs a van. There's always something that wants shifing.'

Then, one night when Anne found herself without a car to pick up two of her children from a school disco in Ulverston, Gordon and the van came to her aid. As the crowd of teenagers poured out of Buffers nightclub, Gordon flicked on the flashing orange light, to announce his arrival. Nicola and Matthew were mortified.

Early on, getting time away from the farm was difficult but luckily the twins followed different pursuits. Where Donald took time off in winter to play football for Esthwaite, Gordon was more interested in running, at summer sports. He was a keen and successful fell-runner. His grandma said she'd treat him when he won his first race. He won at Eskdale and she gave him a white five-pound note. He thought he was rich.

Gordon and Elsie married, here, at Rusland in 1956, and in 2016 celebrated their diamond anniversary in the Reading Rooms.

In 1964 they moved, with Anne and Jean to live at Iconthwaite, with Elsie's parents. Life was hectic with an expanding farm and young family but when all their children were small, Gordon and Donald took alternate weekends off.

Gordon, Elsie, Anne and Jean would either visit relatives or put two armchairs in the back of the farm's Bedford van and go for a picnic. The armchairs were strapped together but not to the sides of the Bedford. Once, when returning up the steep hill to Iconthwaite, the chairs slowly slid backwards, with the girls still in them. I'll let you imagine what happened next.

In his retirement Gordon took up art and wood-turning, grew sweet peas for Elsie and giant vegetables for the show. He spent many a happy hour on Hawkshead bowling green and, this last season, played especially well. He loved his sport and could be very competitive, especially when playing table-tennis with Angus and Helen.

He remained active, pottering about his garden, and walking around the valley.

One day last year, Anne's phone rang. It was Gordon.

'Can you see me?' he asked.

'Where are you?'

'On the fell'

And there he was waving from the skyline.

I wonder, while he was there, looking down on the land he once worked, the valley he adored, if he knew how much he'd accomplished. I suspect not. He was far too modest. Gordon didn't crave adulation. His ethos was you get back what you put in and he was more than satisfied with what he got in return.

In the condolence cards Gordon's family received, many commented on how he was always willing to share his experiences and wisdom, with a twinkle in his eye. He was good-humoured and enjoyed a crack.

Miles Dickinson remembers a day when he drove to the auction and passed Gordon who was chatting to Les Metcalf at the Syke. Two hours later, Miles returned to find Gordon and Les still in the same spot.

But life passes quickly. One minute Gordon was getting up at dawn to work Bobby and Charlie in the fields, the next he and Elsie are Facetiming their grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Yes, he fully embraced technology because it was a way of keeping in touch. In the past eighteen months Facebook proved to be a lifeline, as he kept abreast of goings-on and scrolled through photographs of his beloved Lakeland.

On being admitted to hospital his first question was, 'Is there a wifi connection?'

He Facetimed his girls from his hospital bed - asking Anne for news from Rusland, and instructing Jean on what to do with his dahlias.

For a brief moment he reflected on his life. He said, 'I've not made too bad a job of things, have I?'

Indeed Gordon, you didn't. You've done a grand job.

*Words by Jean Woodhouse. Read by Ross Baxter*