

Uncle David

I didn't think I'd be wearing these fancy clothes again so soon. Or standing at the front of a church.

Uncle David didn't wear fancy clothes that often, but he was wearing his suit last month over in Milstead and Phil asked him where his Sheriff's badge was. He used to wear his Sheriff's badge on special occasions quite a lot but not so much recently. He'd promised to wear it for the next event. That's why Charlotte went crazy and bought a load for us to wear today. Is anyone wearing clogs?

Charlotte, Hannah and I put this together the other day.

As children we'd often spend holidays staying at Yew Tree Farm with Granny P, Grandad and Joan and then just with Granny P and Joan. Yew Tree Farm was a particularly comfy and cosy place as there would always be cooking happening and people coming and going. Things smelled nice and there was interesting old stuff everywhere: pictures on the walls, porcelain, things tucked in drawers, nooks and crannies galore. If it were Danish, it might be hygge. There was even a cellar, and you could do a complete circuit of downstairs going round and around. It was amazing for hide and seek.

Uncle David's house wasn't like that.

You could tell he was home if his clogs were outside on the doorstep. And if he was there, we'd hassle him, and he'd normally let us play a game of space invaders on his computer.

As we got older and accommodation at Yew Tree Farm became scarce at Christmas I'd get billeted to David's house. Others did too sometimes. Hello Paul. You couldn't imagine a

greater contrast. There was none of the ceremony that existed at Granny P's. There were no cups and saucers. No trinkets. In his house the things on windowsills were circuit boards, soldering irons, electronic component catalogues and pages and pages of programming code. And the windows would always be open.

Heating was the aga and an electric fire. The Aga wasn't in the kitchen. If I were an estate agent, I'd say it was in Reception 2. The electric fire was in Reception 1. We used to watch Rab C Nesbitt (with the subtitles on) in Reception 1. He loved that. Back to the heating. I've slept in some chilly places, camping out in the snow. But I reckon those winter nights staying at Uncle David's were the coldest of my life. Single glazing, a summer duvet and nearly every window open to the cold east wind. Paul was the special one though. He got fresh bed linen, straight from the packet.

As David might have been up early to milk the cows he often went to bed before me. When it was time for me to go to bed I'd go up to the bathroom and turn on the light. I'll try to paint you a picture. Imagine, before the days of CGI and expensive special effects in films, if the story needed to evaporate a character, make them disappear in some otherworldly way, they would simply show a pair of smoking shoes where the character had just been. Back to David's bathroom. There, in front of the loo, would be the socks, jeans and pants from which David would have stepped during his bedtime routine. This wasn't a one off, it was the pattern. And why not. It was his house.

Breakfasts were great. I recall having to feed the Aga with logs to get going. As it was Christmas, we might use fresh tea bags rather than one of the ones drying in the dish. And then we'd have kippers. David loved kippers and these were fancy ones that he'd been given or had posted in from some kipper expert. Or it would be eggs. There was always a

big loaf of bread and an unwrapped block of cheddar cheese sat on top of the fridge, not in it. He liked his cheese to dry out.

Sometimes he was chatty and at others he wasn't. There was never any small talk. A yes/no question might elicit nothing more than a single word response. And in many ways that was refreshing. Granny P's house was full of ceremonies: cups and saucers, other old people coming to visit and requiring entertainment, the Boxing Day mulled wine party where small talk was essential. But David showed that there was another approach to life and conversation that was a more straightforward and functional. "Would you like to stay for tea?" Granny might ask. "No, thank you." If you got an "Alright then?", you weren't expected to answer. You'd be straight on to some interesting subject or another. I remember asking if he'd like to hold Dexter when he was just a few weeks old. "No, not really."

His telephone manner was similarly efficient. You'd pick up the receiver, say hello, and David would launch straight into whatever was on his mind. Never a "hello, how are you?" With me it was about his bicycle: "My chain keeps skipping between 2nd and 3rd gear", or "My front brake squeaks." Then we'd talk bike mechanics for 40 minutes. With Charlotte it might be the American comedian, David Sedaris. He liked listening to him on Radio 4, so he'd phone her to let her know he was on. Hannah got a call from him once asking whether Phil was "in the clink" yet. Or, in prison, kids: the clink is slang for prison. There was genuine reason for his comedy concern: Han and Phil had somehow managed to make the Dartford crossing without paying the toll. David was gleefully fixated on this and wanted to learn of the consequences.

He was reluctant to join in any family gathering. Hannah would be sent to the pub to rout him out on Christmas Day because it was decided he wouldn't be rude to her. But once there with us, sat around the table, he would enjoy himself. I hope you recall his different laughs: the one where he shook and then the head-thrown-back guffaw.

When it came to Christmas presents it was quite simple. He'd appreciated the novelty gift. He bought Granny the singing Billy Bass that was an important feature in her kitchen for years. Han got a kung-fu hamster once and her tail-waving crocodile still works. She bought him a novelty gift once: a watch with Saddam Hussein's face on it, which he loved. Kids, Saddam Hussein was an evil dictator who ruled Iraq for many years. All his Christmas shopping would be done either just before closing on Christmas eve or sometimes on Boxing Day as you could possibly get good deals. And he never used capitals for people's names on the gift tags. Why bother?

He went on trips to Lourdes in Southern France. He'd get a good price (via a friend in the travel industry who organised pilgrimage tours) because he was happy to fly out on a Friday the thirteenth. Lourdes was also a mecca for novelty gifts (I recognise I'm mixing religions here, no apology), and he'd return with catholic paraphernalia. I particularly liked the light-up Jesus that he sometimes had plugged into the shaving socket in his bathroom.

He subscribed to the Beano, so I always got a Beano album for Christmas but from the age of about 15 I'd get the Viz annual instead. Viz was another of his magazine subscriptions (along with Computer Nerd Weekly). For those who aren't familiar with Viz it's a magazine that isn't suitable for children. I am so very grateful to him for Viz. I've loved it ever since. It never fails to make me laugh with its rude irreverence.

One Christmas he gave Hannah the keys to the fork-lift and with no instruction told her to put the Christmas lights in the Yew Tree. He enjoyed watching her struggle with this and found it most amusing.

Deefer was a special dog who arrived in Wormshill many years ago. Peter Allchin found him half-starved and mangy tied to Black Post just outside the village. Granny P needed another dog, so Deefer was thought to be a possible candidate though maybe without the best start in life. Granny P wanted to call him Sam, I think, but David called him D for dog or Deefer and Deefer won out. He was a pretty special character and a great companion for both Granny P and David. He was gentle and a lovely dog. But he had his faults: every other male dog was a challenge. David and Hannah were at a local country fayre with Deefer once when David entered Deefer into the dog show. Hannah was the unwitting handler. Deefer did well but disgraced himself for humping the other dogs. On another occasion he won a rosette but was then disqualified for fighting. While David was in no way a fighter himself, he and Deefer were kindred spirits – they walked their own paths in life. In fact, David was proud that while he had been knocked out in school boxing contest his opponent had broken his hand in the process.

He thought Charlotte had athletic talent though. Back in the mid nineties she was a competitive rower and David thought her muscles were sufficient to be one of the Gladiators on the Saturday evening TV show of that name.

Also in the nineties, when the supermarkets were forcing milk prices through the floor, David took direct action: he created informative labels about milk production and the plight of dairy farmers, went to Sainsburys in Sittingbourne and proceeded to stick these labels on the bottles of milk. As a slightly intimidating figure Sainsburys didn't quite know what to do.

In the end they took his name and address, and he was banned from Sainsburys stores for life. Apparently. He had a pair of overalls from a garage he'd found in Ireland coincidentally called The David Prentice Group. They'd also found the coincidence amusing and had given him a pair. The following week, he went to Sainsburys in his special David Prentice overalls and danced in front of the cameras at the door before doing his normal weekly shop. And as far as I know was still doing his shopping there until recently.

So yes, he walked his own path, he didn't follow convention, he did what he enjoyed and didn't care too much about what people thought. He loved laughing, being a bit naughty, and he approved of others being irreverent and didn't have much time for pointless ceremony. We think the world is a greyer without him.