A Tribute to Ian Forbes by Mike Pike

The word legend is much over-used and it is said that no-one is irreplaceable, but Ian Forbes was certainly a legend as far as the Old Wilsonians are concerned. He is the only Life President the OWA have ever elected and it may be a considerable period of time before we elect another one.

As well as being President of the OWA, twice, he was also President of the Cricket and Football Clubs, one of only three members to achieve this momentous hat-trick. He played both cricket and football for the OWs- his haul of 1,217 wickets is only bettered by two bowlers - whilst his batting skills can best be described as hit and miss, and mainly the latter!

Initially an off-break bowler Ian decided one day, totally unannounced, and in mid-over, to bowl quick, which particularly startled Bryan Watts, who was keeping wicket at the time and, from that moment on, this became his modus operandi. He would always terrify Coney Hall on their annual visit to Hayes and regularly picked up six or seven wickets in this fixture.

As we all know, Ian enjoyed a drink – more of which later – and he never missed an opportunity to ensure that there were a number of jugs available for the post match entertainment, even if they were manufactured. When playing away at South Bank Polytechnic one year the game had reached its final over and our opponents had just lost their sixth wicket with only three balls of the game remaining. South Bank had no chance of winning the game and neither did we - four wickets from three balls does not work, unless exceptional circumstances evolve, and they were a good 50 or 60 runs short of our total . Tom Sissons had just taken his fourth wicket and Mike George had held two catches, so Ian unashamedly approached the in-coming batsmen and informed him that we could get two jugs from this situation as Tom needed one wicket for a five for and Mike one catch for his third. “Could you see your way to offering Mike a gentle catch”, he inquired – this was in the days before league cricket, so there was no chance of us gaining extra bowling points. To be fair to the batsman, he did his best to oblige but, in the end, no further wickets were taken and the game ended in a draw.

On the football pitch, and when skippering the 2nd Xl, Ian went to the centre-circle to greet his opposing captain and the referee for the pre-match ritual of spinning a coin to determined ends. Ian lost this encounter and promptly said to his adversary: “Best of three?” The latter was so nonplussed that he agreed. He was deadly in front of goal but, unfortunately, this tended to be his own, and he claims to have scored over 60 own goals – this might be a slight exaggeration but it is not far from the truth, his only regret being that he never scored a hat-trick of OGs!.

When he hung up his boots – both cricket and football - he could be seen at the Club virtually every Saturday, something that continued to the very end, and although, and by his own admission, this was primarily and initially to support Alex, Doug and Stuart in their own playing careers, he was also always working hard for the Club, whether it be helping alleviate the parking problems during the football season or assisting with the cricket teas during the summer.“I’ve got a ‘B’ in bread buttering” he told me earlier this year, as he, Jill and Denise Pilgrim busily prepared the three teas for our home sides.

He was also the 1st Xl umpire for a time, whilst the immaculate cricket statistics he kept were always eagerly studied on President's Day. And no-one could sell fund-raising opportunities like Ian. At the recent cricket end of season dinner I joked that I had been approached by a visitor to the Club who protested: "This guy has just said 'Two pounds please' to me and I only came here to read the gas metre." Ian never asked if you wanted to buy a raffle ticket he simply said "How many do you want" and it worked, and the amount of money he raised for the Club is incalculable. He never missed an opportunity to fund-raise to the extent that he used to run a book on the length of the speeches at the OWA Dinner, either requesting the speaker at the time to speed up or slow down according to his own prediction.

And he was generous to a fault, always putting his hands into his own pockets. Many of you will have bought him a scotch and dry, to which he would respond "Thank you, my boy", but there cannot be many – I would go as far as saying ***any,*** who have been more the giver than the recipient. Many years ago the Football Club decided to call him 'Pisa', because he leans a lot, the undoubted result of his drinking, but apparently he never suffered from a hang-over. Richard Smart once suggested that we should set up a sinking fund - appropriate name – in case Ian moved away as it would have such a devastating effect on the bar takings!

Ian instigated the annual Past Presidents' lunch, the Football Club's Vice-Presidents' Day, now named after 'Mac' McAlister and the monthly, Owls gatherings. At the October lunch Ian was seen struggling to identify the players in a photograph of an old OW football team. He was not having much success so switched his attention to an adjoining photograph, where his identification skills improved considerably, although the fact that the names of all of those involved were printed underneath might have had something to do with it!

Ian was a member of the OW gardening Club - "Watering is my speciality" –
and also instigated Club Force but became increasingly frustrated at the lack of support, particularly this year, that it received from the members to the extent he was seriously thinking about not having one next year.

The last time I saw Ian was at an OW Council meeting on October 10th. He and Doug left early because Doug had to be up early the next morning as he was going to Bristol, but even after his departure there were at least two occasions when it was suggested we "consult the Life President" on certain issues. Just a few hours later he died, and our only consolation is that he went quickly and was not in pain. He had just made Jill some tea and toast and died shortly afterwards with, and as Alex put it, "with an OWA folder still under his arm"

Of course we all know that Ian could be grumpy and if he disagreed with you he would let you know in no uncertain terms – he disagreed with me a lot – but this was quickly forgotten and he would always express his gratitude to those who worked steadfastly for the Old Wilsonians, which was his second love.

His first love, of course, was his family and he was immensely proud of them all – particularly the fact that Alex and Doug also became Presidents of the Association and Jill its Club captain - and our thoughts are now with Jill, Alex, Doug, Stuart, Helen, Debbie, Gwen, Phillipa, Nicholas, Ellenor, Elizabeth, Francesca, Sammy and Alfie

When Alex asked me to write something for the website in honour of his Dad I said I would but it might take a bit of time a) because he did so much and b) I want to do full justice to such a great man.

In all probability I have forgotten a lot of what he did and have not done him justice, so reserve the right to come back at a later date in an attempt to fill in the many gaps . In the meantime I would urge and encourage others, particularly his contemporaries, to help me to fill in those gaps and share their memories of a truly great Old Wilsonian with the rest of us.

Finally, and to return to the start of this tribute, was Ian an OW legend?

Yes, of course he was.

Is he irreplaceable?

Well, as near as anyone can be.