

Sheetlines

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*'Brian'**David Archer*

I have no recollection of ever being introduced to Brian, and like most people, I simply became aware of him. Brian was a great attender and went to most meetings. He was also very distinctive: short in stature, with a beautifully shiny and polished head. Slightly pointed, with a neat ring of hair just above the ears. In all other matters, Brian was a hairy man, with thick dark eyebrows and a strong growth peeking out of his cuffs and shirt neck. Given his character, I am positive that he had hairy feet as well. One could not help but like him. He always had an ETA for meetings and would appear and hesitate at the door, often with a small shopping bag, before launching himself towards a friend. Being ever so slightly stooped, with his head forward, he seemed to almost overbalance and progress across the floor in a gliding shuffle. Brian had arrived. On such occasions, it was exceedingly difficult to hold a conversation, as he was also a very quiet person. He whispered. In recent years he seemed to turn the volume even lower, so low that if one wanted verbal information, one had to use the telephone in order to hear what he said.

Others will tell of Brian's brilliance, of his mathematical prowess and its application to matters cartographical, but I remember him especially for the fun. Not ho-ho-ho joke-telling fun, though he had an acute sense of humour, but for the little things that made Brian a fun person, a character but not an eccentric. Most of the fun things that I remember of Brian, arose from his devotion to detail and accuracy. The accuracy of a mathematician, and the meticulousness of someone who knows what is required in order to produce a result that would attract full marks. Brian never aimed for less than full marks.

In 1992, when I was Secretary, the committee decided to ask Brian to talk at the next AGM, so I approached him in good time, shall we say in October for the following May. Yes, he would speak, but it would need a lot of preparation, so that it would have to be the AGM after next. Just about enough time. He then went underground on the matter. Again, I cannot give a date, but it would have been months before the AGM, probably December or January; Brian rang and wanted to know the room number in Birkbeck that we had booked for the great day. I could not give one, as I think there was the possibility of one of several due to exams. He was most put out by this, and could not go any further with his preparations until he had visited the room in which he was to speak. So I told him that it would be the big double room on the third floor, that we had used before. I never found out why, but he went there a couple of times and the preparations continued. As May got nearer, so the telephone calls became more frequent. Which end of the room would he be speaking from? Where exactly would he have to speak from, could an easel be provided for the flip chart he was making, and how high would it be? And other minor points that I now forget, but things which all too often can mar a talk if not taken into account. Brian was planning down to the last detail within details.

In the week before the AGM, it was agreed that I would collect his flip chart, his long wooden pointer and various other things on the Friday, and take them to Birkbeck on the Saturday morning for Brian to set up. I then spent the whole of Thursday, trying unsuccessfully, to arrange for some sort of amplification system in the room. A double room, and eighty people for Brian to whisper to. Why had I not thought of this before? We arrived early and started to prepare the room, expecting Brian to be there already, but he did not

appear. Coffee was almost finished and still no speaker had arrived. These were the days before mobile phones, not that he would have had one (or did he? Full of surprises). At last, our man appeared at the door, and although extremely flustered, went straight to the front and calmed himself by putting his things in order. I asked if he was all right, and he said that a tube train had not run according to the timetable. No more was said, he was furious with London Transport. The whole morning had been planned around the Underground timetable, which had failed. Until then, despite having been raised in London, I had never even considered that tubes had timetables, they just arrived and one left home in plenty of time to get from A to B. Not Brian, he had researched the times, (probably undertaken a dummy run the previous Saturday), and they had failed him on his big day. But our speaker did not fail the society, and sitting at the very back of the room, I heard most of what he said.

Anything that involved preparation, such as answering questions, writing papers, or speaking at the AGM became a “job”, and was added to the pile, to be dealt with when its turn came. Big jobs and little jobs were inter-filed and seldom could one speed their rise to the top. One just asked for something and forgot about it until it turned up, and one was more than delighted with the result. Brian wrote two pieces for inclusion in our publications, and after agreeing to do them, we could get nothing out of him until he sent the final text. No drafts, just final polished and word perfect text. This obviously caused us problems in that we had no idea how long the pieces would be, and hence could not finalise all sorts of things such as page numbers, indexes or even how long the book would be and hence get final quotations for printing. We just left some space, and were prepared to have a longer book if necessary, as what would arrive could not be cut. Jobs inevitably piled up, but he could never be rushed, and would worry if pressured. With any job, Brian just went his own way; as he knew what was needed, and it had to be done properly, so there was no point in discussing it with others.

When Landmark Information Group were getting things off the ground, they approached me, seeking publications that were of a mathematical nature, in order to help with the complex calculations needed for their vast set up. I immediately put them on to Brian, as being the only person who could undertake the calculations needed. Being Brian, he was very wary at first, and wanted to know the ins and outs of what they were doing. I could not tell him, so they invited him down to see the set-up and discuss things. As a result, he agreed terms and was installed as a consultant. Whilst being very pleased with the recognition the title gave, it caused him no end of amusement. He rose to the occasion by announcing the formation of PG consultancy, with nicely printed compliment slips, sent from the corporate headquarters in Parsons Green. Such was his hold on the market that he subsequently became the cartographical guru for Sitescope and Timeline Maps. Brian was justifiably proud of his technical writings and proud to have won the Hodson Award for them. But he also expected society members to have read and remembered what he had written. Although his writings on quite complex matters are always wonderfully clear, sometimes the facts do not remain in the reader’s memory. The reader being me. In this, I lived in fear of his suddenly testing me on the difference between an origin and a meridian, or of having to explain in twenty words, how grids tie in with projections.

Brian liked a nice organised life and planned things accordingly. Hence, when the London telephone numbers were changed, he sent out slips with his new number, and an instruction not to telephone at certain times in the evening, as he did not want to be interrupted, the certain times being those of University Challenge and Mastermind. Similarly,

although Brian went everywhere by public transport, (and would travel long distances to deliver manuscripts, not trusting the post with such important documents), he was sympathetic to the problems of car owners. Living in central London, with bumper to bumper street parking, he was exceedingly organised to receive visitors. If he knew you were coming by car, he would keep a space for you, and had two red and white plastic cones with a plank to go across them, which he would put in the road outside his flat. When the society visited the National Railway Museum, we were shown around the library and given free range to browse. Brian disappeared into the stacks, eventually returning with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, plus a copy of a small volume on railway history, that he had co-written, and asked the librarian if the museum would like him to sign it. Great fun, and a good tale, but only one of many. If he were to read this piece, he would surely point out the slight exaggerations and small errors of memory that creep in with time. But he would also, I am sure, be pleased that his thoroughness was appreciated. As I have stressed, Brian thought that if you did something, it had to be done spot on, and this involved lots of research, preparation and polishing.

Whenever he telephoned, Member 41 would always start the conversation “Brian here, David”. Not that one needed any identification, given the ever so distinctive voice and slightly nasal delivery. Amongst society members, by itself, the word Brian has only ever referred to one person, and I tend to think that he quite liked the name. His opening remarks to the 1994 AGM mention “the blue plaque (not yet installed) ‘Brian Was Born Here’”. He certainly had great fun in the 1980s when he saw Bryan Adams splattered across newspaper headlines and record shop displays, “but it’s spelt differently” he would note. And I feel certain, that if he could have obtained a copy, somewhere amongst his most treasured maps, lurks a poster for the Monty Python film celebrating, *The life of Brian*.