

Mike Cattermole – Alastair knew that he was not healthy but decided to continue to enjoy his life the only way he knew. In spite of doctor's orders, he couldn't or wouldn't change.

We all know you won't find a better writer than Alastair, and his wizardry with words was also evident when he was working for C4. He often had just seconds left to sum up the day. Sometimes, he didn't look ready but then produced a flow of inspired observations and conclusions of what we had just watched for the past two and a half hours. It was done with no fluffs and delivered at exactly the right pace and emphasis to take us off air. Just amazing to watch at first hand.

So, yes, I was in awe of him both at the Life and at C4 but at the same time knew that he was a bit of a moody character and not hugely reliable with deadlines etc. But that was him, part of his idiosyncratic genius, I don't think he could help it. He was a complicated soul and a vulnerable one – I wouldn't have been the only one that kept an eye on him, just to make sure he was ok.

The other thing I loved about Al was his sense of humour. His Weekender column was a joy and so were the piss-takes when chatting to him. You'd be laughing loudly when Al was on form.

Simon Holt and I made a point of joining him for lunch at his cottage during the Cheltenham Festival where he and his partner Ann would produce a delicious roast before we watched the racing. He could barely sit still and was still putting his bets on.

He rang me just a few weeks ago as he'd spotted something for the Ayr Gold Cup – his sort of race – which I had called home that afternoon. I lit up when I saw he was calling. It was so good to talk to him.

To my regret, I couldn't make the Cheltenham press room opening (Andrew Franklin, our old C4 boss, went along and even Ted Walsh came over from Ireland) but know how chuffed he was at them naming it after him and rightly so. By ALL accounts, he had a wonderful day and evening, too.

He told Richard Phillips, in true Alastair style. "It could not have gone any better. Marvellous for the soul and shocking for the ego! A special occasion." Who else could sum it up like that?

Alastair went out on a massive high, surrounded by love and admiration at his favourite place.

Effectively, he did something extraordinary that Friday at Cheltenham – he attended his own wake, and there are very few mortals allowed the good fortune and privilege of that!

Emma Hart – I've been thinking about Alastair pretty much continuously since Friday morning, and remembering the good times we had and what a unique place to work The Sporting Life was. There was nowhere like it and I'm certain there won't be again.

I was absolutely stunned when I saw on social media on Friday morning that Alastair had left us. I had been sharing in the previous days how genuinely happy I was for him that he'd been celebrated in the Cheltenham press room. Surely this couldn't be true. But, Hopper, you confirmed that indeed it was.

There are far too many fond memories. He was the kindest of men – although he ribbed me continuously for many years. But those were the days when office banter was part of the joy of work. And working at the Life with people like Al, was indeed a joy.

Nowadays, you just don't get one of your bosses coming into the office with a carrier bag full of random, large denomination US currency and unopened brown envelopes and asked to please try to make some sense of it!

The last time I saw him was at Cheltenham a couple of years ago. I was, of course, with my sister. He saw us across the concourse and called out: "(expletive) it's the terrible twins!!". He gave us both a bear hug, then went on to ask how our mum was. This terrible twin will miss reading his sublime prose and his depth of knowledge of this incredible sport we all love. Come the November meeting at Cheltenham, I'll be there, and I'll shed a tear in his memory, but I'll smile and be grateful that I had the honour to be a very small part of his working life.

Chris Gundry – We'd agreed, defiantly with laughter, that the government wouldn't beat us – we would pay for fags even if they went up to a fiver! And by God they went up a lot higher over the years and Alastair kept paying. Make no mistake, the mighty Down and myself were once known

as the Mean Machine in the puffing stakes! Alastair would always call popping outside for a smoke as having a gasper. I used that word ever since in my smoking days and it brings a tear to my eye to type it.

Mavros was my name for Alastair after a horse called Alastor O Mavros ran in the 80s so when I met a bloke at the Life called Alastair that was it. If I got a call it would be "Susser [my nickname], Mavros here. Fancy one for the Arkle?"

I never knew Mavros that well. I never travelled with him by train, car or plane, or spoke to him about his family. Just as Mavros would have approved, I'm sitting at the breakfast bar with a whisky and beer remembering the days when I arrived at the Tommy Atkins bar at Cheltenham to be welcomed with a hug by Mavros holding a glass of sloe gin.

Lovely man who laughed aloud.

Simon Holt – On my first day at the Life in December 1985 – specifically on the Weekender – I damaged my car when bumping the vehicle in front at some traffic lights in Haywards Heath. So I arrived a bit late. In the pub after work, this fat f***** turned towards me and sneered: "So you're the **** who crashed his car on his first day!" It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Everyone agrees that Alastair was a superb writer, but he also became an excellent TV presenter, albeit often appearing a little unconventionally disheveled. His emotional enthusiasm (especially at the Festival) and turn of phrase enhanced so many broadcasts. Part of his job was to find the right words to link into the next item, whether it be an interview or a feature, and he would agonise over every syllable before the programme while Lynne, the lovely C4 Racing PA, waited with great patience for dictation. She has always said that it was a complete pleasure, no matter how long it took, as the result was always perfect and she was in the presence of a genius.

In the past couple of years, I have visited and lunched with Alastair several times and, despite his (largely self-inflicted) frailty, he was always on top form and great company provided I didn't mind being called that bad word every ten minutes. In fact, I accepted all the insults as terms of endearment.

Indeed, we became closer than ever and, sadly, I knew the end was coming a few months ago. Despite the dread diagnosis, he made no lifestyle compromises and was determined to enjoy himself right to the end, and our last lunch in Stow was memorably enjoyable.

Al was a complete one off. He could change the atmosphere in a room with an inspirationally funny remark and, while he often misbehaved and had plenty of flaws and, as Jamie mentioned, his share of demons, he was a man of great kindness and wisdom.

And, as the many tributes prove, a loyal friend.

George White – As others have said, Al was both a remarkable writer and a remarkable person. Despite his background – one of the first public schoolboys to work at the Life – he fitted in with everyone. That old saying of 'On the turf and under it, all men are equal' was his lodestar. His big flaw, of course, was that he set himself high standards but also enjoyed life to what would seem to many to be over-indulgent extremes. Such is the price top writers often pay.

It was probably fate that when Jeffrey Bernard became too unwell to continue with his Weekender column Al was there as the natural replacement. He took on the role in true Bernard style – staring at a typewriter well past his deadline with a sheet of paper with nothing but Weekender 1 on it. But, of course, the words when they came were well worth the wait – as were his pieces when I was the Life features editor. On that score though for timeliness of copy I'd still give the edge to Jamie!

Out of the office Alastair was, of course, exceptional company with a great self-deprecating sense of humour. He wasn't one to let life go by and whether it was a party at his father's Barbican apartment to watch the Wimbledon Men's Final, or the Gold Cup dinner during Cheltenham, his one aim was to ensure that all who were there enjoyed the occasion as much as he did even if they wouldn't remember it. Al, Neil [Cook] and I were also frequent after work dinner companions and they're times I'll never forget.

Caro Cluskey – I'm so sad about Alastair, it's a tragedy. I loved his swashbuckling attitude to life. He wrote like a dream and could make you laugh and cry in the same paragraph. He was charming and annoying in equal measure. He was endearing, funny, as polite as they come – but his admin as features editor was nightmarish, he simply stuffed to overflowing bucketloads of contributors' invoices into his desk drawer, where they stayed. It's a wonder anybody got paid. He once asked me for permission to take one of the paper's huge bound volumes out of the office. I said no, of course. But he did it anyway. I've no idea whether the volume ever made its way home.

I believe Alastair's use (misuse?) of the much coveted MGN executives' drinks cabinet led to the demise of that particular company perk.

The day I was "made redundant" from the Life, he sought me out in my office, and we both sat there for quite a long time, speechless and shellshocked. After a few words of comfort, he slowly walked away, shaking his head. I'll always remember that.

Racing has lost a one-off, one of the best writers you'll ever read, and is the poorer for it. We have lost a great friend, and I'm so grateful to have been part of Alastair's Life.

John Curle – Like everyone, I was saddened to hear of Alastair's death. He was a class act and, like all of us, loved the Life.

I saw him in May. We were both attending the wedding of our friend and colleague, David Yates, who is Newsboy of the Daily Mirror. It was a beautiful summer day in East Sussex and I was standing outside chatting to another Daily Mirror man when I spied Alastair.

I pointed towards him and said to my mate; "You probably don't know who that is, but he's a pretty big deal in racing circles. That's Alastair Down and he is a brilliant writer and broadcaster. Not only that, a great bloke as well." He nodded and the conversation moved on.

But five minutes later, standing in front of me was Alastair. "Mr Curle. How are you? Good to see you." We had a good chat and reminisce about life on the Life.

I thought about that when I heard of his death. He will rightly be spoken of in terms of how wonderfully he could write and his great days as part of the Channel Four racing team.

But he was also a very nice man to be around. A great storyteller; agreeable, funny and charming. Naming the Cheltenham press room in his honour was inspired and so well deserved. RIP Alastair.

Monty Court – Just a few hours before Jim Old was due to collect me and take me to my last date with Alastair, I made one of the most memorable and longest phone calls of my life. It was to apologise to Al, and tell him that I would be a non-runner at Cheltenham's tribute to him in their dedication of The Alastair Down Press Room

In doing so, I had no embarrassment in telling him that he was the most talented writer I had ever worked with on the 20 newspapers that have made-up my career. Great memories and plenty of laughs. But we got one thing wrong. There was never to be another meeting. He was dead within hours.

I thanked him on the night. And I thank him again now. The many tributes that have poured in from former colleagues of the Life are positive evidence of the man's astonishing impact on those who had the good fortune to meet him. Cheers mate. I really do hope that we'll meet again.

Hilary Watson – I first met Alastair when my [late husband] John joined the Life's features desk, they became good friends as well as colleagues and his friendship extended to me and our family. Alastair was such a kind man. When John died he rang me and it was such a brave thing to do as he had just lost his beloved daughter Saskia in horrific circumstances and was grieving himself. I will always be grateful for his words of comfort.

He rang me earlier in the year to invite me to lunch in London. Unfortunately it didn't happen but my best memory of Alastair was the famous Sporting Life Christmas lunch (always held in April!). It was in a Chinese restaurant in Esher. I had never had Chinese food, and Alastair, dear man, sat beside me and ordered what he thought I'd like, it was perfect!

He designed the invitation too which featured two Sumo wrestlers with the caption "SL Christmas

Runch” It was edged with horses rear ends with the line “These are the horses arses who weren’t invited.” Happy times. We will miss him.

Mick Malone – I was aware that Alastair wasn't a well man but, what a shock to hear of his passing, particularly after enjoying the ITV racing coverage the previous week at Cheltenham and the unveiling of the Press Room named in his honour. We had almost completed a decade in Orbit House when Alastair joined the Life. Towards the end of the eighties, he was appointed features editor. He was joined by Peter Thomas, Johnny Watson, Dave Atkinson and Paul Fry. It was a department of humour. If ever you were having a poor day and needed cheering up, that was the department to head for. Because of Ali, I had one of my most successful Festivals. He had been investing at big odds on the Martin Tate-trained Rogers Princess for the Coral Golden Hurdle Final, then run over 3m 1f. Going off 8–1 joint fav, Princess led at the last and lagged in by 12 lengths. Deepest condolences to his family. RIP Alastair.

Roy Waterhouse – Friday November 1 2024, and that morning, working from home, I see a post on X. “Ar dheis dé go raibh a anam”, it says, above a photo of Alastair Down. I work out what’s happened. Google translates: “At the right hand of God was his soul.” I find confirmation of his passing. I’m shaken, and I stumble over the work I’m doing.

May 1994. Forget the dismissive ‘oh–no–not–another–hopeful’ handshake Alastair gave me when I was introduced to him on my first day at The Sporting Life. Here I was, a quiet, unsure twenty–something, working in the same office as someone I watched on television frequently and looked up to, as most did.

My earliest interaction with Alastair was similarly unpromising. He took me to one side and said: “My supply... of Financial Times share price reports... has dried up. Could you re–instate it?” I was unaware he had one... I’m not going to pretend I got to know him well, but we sometimes had a chat in his office and my life at the Life got better.

When it comes to writing, there are individual ways with words, then there were Alastair’s.

My favourite written piece of his is his assessment of the 1996 Cheltenham Gold Cup, in which One Man was the short–priced favourite, but he was well beaten, and nobody could argue with how Alastair summed it up: “Going to the second last, you saw him falter – and he went from the full balloon, to the sort with a pin through, in a matter of strides.”

His closing lines on the winner Imperial Call, trained in Ireland by ex–pat British Army veteran Fergie Sutherland read: “As for F Sutherland, long may we have characters like him in our sport. Some ten minutes after the presentation, he interrupted the press corps and said: “Excuse me, I’ve got to go and see the Queen Mother.” Her treat, I think.

My favourite TV memory of Alastair was during Channel 4 Racing’s coverage of the Saturday of the Cheltenham November meeting (2001, I think). He interrupted his piece to camera to broadcast a notice to some offshore workers who had somehow managed to watch the racing out at sea, but in so doing had jammed their radio signal, so they couldn’t be reached in an emergency. Alastair completed his spiel, smiled at the camera and said: “Switch us off!”

A group of Lifers watched the 1995 Chester Cup in his office. When the banter got a little loud, Alastair let us know, saying: “Quiet please in the cheap seats...” That time, though, there was something else he added, immediately after Top Cees had passed the post: “I feel an editorial coming on...” We all know the outcome of the publication of that editorial.

Perhaps The Sporting Life – as in the versions of it from 1994 until its closure in 1998 – didn’t deserve to have a writer as good as Alastair on board. But what should be remembered is the immense quality of his work, both writing and broadcasting. Whether it was about Imperial Call, or Kauto Star, or when he wrote “I’m surprised they let me in” about a visit to Aintree some time after his infamous piece on the 2001 Grand National mudbath. Nobody could put it quite like Alastair. Horseracing in 2024 is in pieces, for lots of reasons. For some, the biggest issue is falling betting turnover; for others, it’s horse welfare issues. In that respect, the loss of Alastair Down will be particularly felt. Horseracing needs all the people it can get onside right now, and Alastair’s would have been a loud and proud voice. Not just a friend, but a BFF to racing.

Andy O'Toole – What a terrible tragedy – I'm so deeply saddened by Alastair's passing. When I recently visited the UK for the first time since I left in 1995, I was fortunate to catch up with Bryan [Pugh] and Jeremy [Chapman], and the recounting of tales was a highlight of my month's trip to Europe and Old Blighty. Al's name came up on many occasions during the catch-ups, and I recall a story he penned about me in the Weekender.

I'm a proud Kiwi and I had tipped him into a NZ-trained horse in the Melbourne Cup in 1993, the year Vintage Crop won for Dermot Weld and Mick Kinane. My tip, Mercator, was a fast-finishing third at 125-1, and the following year, Al thought he'd better consult me for my selection again in the big race. I tipped him into another NZ-trained horse, Double Take. Armed with this information, Al sent his mate Jim McGrath, in Australia, some money to invest on Double Take, while I backed him in the UK at 500-1. Double Take, ridden by Greg Childs, finished a game fourth in the race won by Jeune, and of course, in big handicaps such as the Melbourne Cup, the UK bookies pay out first four, so I got 125-1 a place for my each-way investment. Al, unfortunately for him, had his money on in Australia and the fourth place finish meant no collect with the Australian bagmen! I've been in Australia now for almost 20 years. My five years at the Life were among the best times of my entire life, and I was so proud and honoured to work with a host of tremendous people, and Alastair was right at the top of the tree. I learnt so much from him and all the team from 1990-95, and the world of horse racing is so much poorer for his sudden passing. RIP Al. Kiwi

Clive Weight – So sad to hear the latest passing of a former Lifer. Alastair was such a talent that in some ways feels wasted. He could have turned his hand to numerous roles outside of our small world of horseracing, but thankfully racing was all the richer for his prose over the years.

Ed Abelson – I first met Alastair when I was transferred from Mirror Group to work with The Sporting Life. We bonded over Cheltenham when he discovered that my father owned National Spirit, a dual Champion Hurdle winner. He even interviewed my mother for the Post, who was extremely pleased when he described her (in her 80s) as "having more marbles than Hamleys". When I left the Post, I set up my own company and in the early days we made short video previews for the major race meetings, which we sold to various bookmakers. In late 2005 I asked Alastair whether he would be willing to do some for us, and much to my surprise he immediately agreed. He was by this time already heading Channel 4 racing coverage, so it was quite a coup for us to get him and certainly helped to put the company on the map. Alastair never wrote a script, but scribbled a few notes and then proceeded to talk without hesitation or deviation for 20 minutes, witty and word perfect.

Not known for his skill as a tipster, which he would be first to acknowledge, his colour pieces on video matched his TV presentation. His columns in the Racing Post showing his huge affection for and knowledge of racing. He memorably described the Kempton Boxing Day meeting as a "social service" as it got families out of the house so avoided any more Christmas rows. Working with him was always fun, either in the office in London or at Cheltenham.

He managed to persuade Lord Vestey, who was then chairman of Cheltenham racecourse, to try to find us a saw as we needed to make some alterations to our Portakabin. Vestey volunteered to drive home to get one if he couldn't find a saw on the course, though we saved him a journey as a saw was found nearby.

Once when we all descended on Alastair's house to shoot an early morning Royal Ascot preview we were offered bacon sandwiches. Then Alastair asked us which was the appropriate wine to have with a bacon sandwich. We deferred to him as being more knowledgeable on the subject. He settled on a rosé as it was "too early for a red".

When my mother died and we were clearing her house, Alastair arranged for a portrait of National Spirit to be given to Cheltenham. We also had a small replica of the Champion Hurdle trophy which my brother and I gave to Alastair. We thought it would be appreciated by him and be the appropriate home for someone who loved Cheltenham so much. We will all miss him.

Kevin Impey – I was in the middle of a conversation on my mobile phone when a message from Hopper flashed up on my screen beginning with those all too familiar dreaded words... “It is with deep regret...” So, another great Lifer has left us for the racecourse in the sky.

Alastair Down can be described in many words, as has been so brilliantly written in the magnificent tributes by his colleagues and friends, but for me one stands out: empathy. I recall being at Steve Delve’s funeral when I had just suffered a family bereavement of my own, and being there that day made me even more emotional.

Ali said hello to me, but soon realised that I was not in a good place. I mentioned my loss and he immediately gave me his undivided attention and spoke, as he always wrote, with all the right words. But it was not just his words, it was heartfelt feelings he had for a fellow human being. It was one of those landmark moments I have not forgotten. Needless to say, Ali soon had me in a better place. All those who knew him were in a better place when he was around them, whether on the racecourse, in the office or the pub.

Since The Sporting Life ceased publishing, Hopper has had the unenviable task of informing us of many losses of our great friends and workmates, but I do not recall seeing such lengthy tributes as those written for Alastair. It shows how highly he was respected and liked. Ali, you were a Group 1 journalist and a Group 1 individual. RIP

David Atkinson – Although it was expected, Alastair's death has still come as a shuddering shock, and all that remains are wonderful words and memories as well as all those things left unsaid. The old showbiz saying “Go out at the top and leave them wanting more” rings true, never more so than at Cheltenham last week. Alastair was absolutely thrilled to have the Press Room and a race named after him, and what a splendid occasion it was with family, old friends and colleagues and jump racing’s great and good in attendance.

You get to know someone pretty well when you are stuck in a small office with them for a number of years working on the Life. We both smoked then – he with industrial quantities of gaspers and me puffing away on the odd cigar. It was like working in a smoke-filled snooker hall. He could be temperamental, brusque and inconsiderate on occasions but that was soon forgotten with laughter and jokes.

I was reminded of his great use of words while watching the events unfold at Del Mar last Saturday. He never had a great opinion of the Breeders’ Cup, or as he called it the Bleeders’ Cup, in which he described the runners as “Lasix-fuelled sand ferrets”. He was also less than enamoured with all-weather jump racing which thankfully only lasted a few years.

In 1993 I watched the void Grand National fiasco with him in his cottage in the Cotswolds, when he uttered the immortal words: “How can you start the Grand National with just 20 yards of Hattie Jacques’s knicker elastic?”

He was equally at ease on TV. He had been spotted by Andrew Franklin at a Cheltenham preview night where he had the crowd eating out of his hands, and was booked to fill in for Big Mac’s [John McCririck] newspaper review. He stayed at my place in Balham the night before and we picked up all the first editions of Saturday’s papers at Charing Cross, spread them across the sitting room floor and cut out likely items. I got him up with difficulty at six the next morning to drive him to the C4 studios. When he was in the car I said: “Now, Al are you sure you’ve got everything?” He replied very nervously: “Yes, I think so, but have you got a drop of vodka?” Farewell Al. You were unforgettable and are unforgotten.