

Geoff Lester: Really gutted – Ali rang me 10 days ago and we went down Memory Lane. He knew I could not make the Cheltenham press room ‘crowning’ so we arranged to meet with a few of the Life boys in Farrington, ironically yesterday! Now we know why he didn’t turn up – maybe, in hindsight, he was calling me on the phone that day to say ‘goodbye’.

Ali was the best racing writer I’ve known, but a nightmare when it came to meeting deadlines. I loved working alongside him. From 1986-1998 we covered all the major meetings together.

As chief correspondent I was in charge of the race report and Ali was the supreme colour writer.

I remember being at the Eclipse one day when we had a 6pm deadline. I filed my piece at 5.58pm, and when the office asked me ‘how’s Ali doing?’ I looked across at his laptop, only to find ‘Down 1’ on an otherwise blank screen. Predictably, Ali was on the balcony at Sandown having a ciggy, and, though he got a friendly bollocking from the chief sub when it finally arrived, it was 1000 words of magnificent Down prose. He was different class to everyone else. We all knew that the booze and smokes would eventually kill him, but i don’t think he ever recovered from the horrendous murder of his daughter Saskia.

Buried my brother last month – this has been such an awful year. I’m missing you already Ali, RIP old mate.

Bryan Pugh – Alastair joined the Life in early March 1981. I remember that because there were two job vacancies on offer and I was lucky enough to fill the other. While I dutifully turned up for work on the Monday, Alastair was a no-show having already told Ossie Fletcher he couldn’t possibly start until the week after his beloved Cheltenham Festival.

He began his Life career working alongside us mere mortals on the subs’ desk and it soon became apparent that he was destined for higher things. Any story of substance he was given to edit, be it political or betting news, prompted him to disappear into one of the assistant editors’ offices, coffee and fags in hand, to discuss it at great length with George, Jeremy or whoever was on duty. Although this meant we had to sub more stories during his prolonged absences I think we all realised he was a burgeoning talent.

As his writing career took off, Alastair’s scant regard for deadlines became almost as legendary as his masterful prose and always reminded me of Captain Jack Sparrow’s famous quip: “I love these moments. I like to wave to them as they pass by.” But although he may have frustrated his editors, he never disappointed his readers.

At the last Life reunion he attended a couple of years ago I asked him what was the latest he had turned up for a major racing event. He chortled and walked off – and about 15 minutes later came back and whispered in my ear: “Wince’s 1,000 Guineas [1999], they were unsaddling her.” Not that anyone would have been any the wiser such was the quality of his report.

I last saw Alastair in August 2022 when I took my wife ‘The Professor’ – he called her that for 40 years just because she was a primary school teacher – to visit him in his personal fiefdom of Bledington in the Cotswolds. We had heard he had not been in the best of health and wondered what to expect as we awaited him outside his headquarters, the King’s Head. Suddenly a smiling, waving Alastair made a grand entrance in his open-top black MG sports car that he had driven all of the 200 yards from his house. He was the perfect raconteur and host that day and that’s how we will remember him.

Everyone will have their favourite big-race report or famous trainer interview penned by Alastair, but the article I recall most fondly featured no horses or household names yet highlighted not just his prowess with the pen but also his compassion. This 2001 Post column (below) was a marvellous tribute to our much-loved former colleague Stuart Oliver and all Lifers were grateful to him for writing it. What a pleasure and great honour to have known and worked with such a master of his craft. RIP Alastair.

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Alastair DOWN on Friday

Friend and inspiration who made light of such an unfair deal

STUART OLIVER, who died last week at the age of 54, was not a maker of headlines, but nobody who met him during his 31 years' service on The Sporting Life will remember the man with anything other than respect and affection.

His ruin, with whom he lived until her death, was a Barnardo's girl, and Stuart must have been standing a bit of a long way down the queue when God was handing out life's advantages.

He was born with a severe form of brittle bone disease and spent most of his first ten years in hospital when a trip would mean a broken arm and even a violent sneeze could do in a colporteur.

But he loved racing from an early age and, as a teenager, he used to bombard The Life with letters pointing out errors or asking probing questions that few could answer.

Eventually, just to shut him up, they summoned him for an interview as an office boy, but when he appeared, on walking sticks and clearly fearful of being bumped into in the letter-shedder of a busy workplace, the plan was shelved.

But he was soon found a job in the form room and started on January 17, 1966. From then on, it is fair to say The Life was his life.

In those days, all the form was typed out by hand, then sent to the printers and through the readers' department before coming back to the form room for final correction.

No, I have no idea how the paper got out every day—in this technical age you can download the Paganini Guinness form at the touch of a button, something he mastered to later life.

To add to Stuart's problems, he was possessed of a stammer of machine-gun proportions, something which could turn a joke that should have lasted 30 seconds into something the length of the ten o'clock news.

And wherever Stuart was, laughter was never far away. Here was a man who had every right to be a miserable sod, but was anything but. He would complain from time to time if he thought something was wrong, but never about his own problems.

You never heard "It's all right for you" from Stuart. "Stuart's gobble" was his line, and he didn't flinch as a cliché proverbial when confronted with buying a drink, he was wonderfully generous if someone needed bailing out for a serious few quid.

Stuart, round, mustered, chopped, bald and bearded, could have been a figure of fun. Instead he was a bringer of fun and there was about him a certain dignity.

He was categorised as disabled, but in fact he was more disabling because of the steadfast way he endured the complexities of life that his condition inflicted on him.

An authority on Country and Western music, he amassed a serious collection of records and some of those who knew him are fearful he may have the last laugh by leaving them his Jim Reeves archive.

He had the most marvellous friend and ally in his Sporting Life colleague and current GP reporter Steve Drove, a man whose occasional bloody-mindedness figures a long lasting battle with his innate kindness.

They owned horses together, including four-time winner Mon Amie, and Drove was very much the ringleader of those who visited Stuart in the nursing home where he spent his last years.

A recent operation for a brain tumour revived Stuart to his old self for a few days—though Drove told him the op hadn't worked "because you've still got that stammer"—but complications and another operation led to a sudden decline and last Friday both his doctors and his friends decided he had had enough and released him.

Stuart Oliver's funeral is at South London Crematorium, Streatham Vale, at 1pm on May 4.

It was not an easy life, but friends and colleagues who gather to pay their respects to this special man will do so because they got a lot out of the way he lived it.

Stuart Oliver (second left): laughter was never far away from this bringer of fun

James Lambie – I think many of us knew Alastair's time was limited, but oh, what a shock. Alastair had his demons and they were darker than we'll ever know, but you would never have guessed it when you were in his company. He spoke as he wrote, with effortless fluency and wit. Spreading spontaneous laughter was what I'll always remember him for. In the 'Stab' after work and after official closing-time, with a pint in his hand he would have us all in stitches.

There were also many post-Cheltenham evenings that we spent at the bar in the Fosse Manor Hotel in Stow-on-the-Wold or at the Fosse Bridge Inn at somewhere I've forgotten. Joyous, uplifting evenings that were good for the soul. And while his writing also appeared to flow effortlessly I don't think it came easy to him.

The last time we met, maybe ten years ago now, he joked that he had taken over my mantel for being the last man out of the press room – he had become the holder of the Lambie silver salver, as he called it. In truth one could almost say he had given his life to his work, I believe the pressures of his job contributed in no small measure to his smoking and drinking, which in the end played havoc with his health. And on that note I'll be having an extra large measure of Old Pulteney in his memory tonight. I send my deepest sympathy to his family.

Jeremy Chapman – Shattering news but in a way no real surprise. Alastair Down has left the room and racing is all the poorer. A flawed genius but a magician with words, both written and spoken. And to think Ossie Fletcher wasn't going to take him on when he applied for a job. Thankfully, some of his lieutenants managed to persuade him Al had a bit of talent! Some of the early columns he wrote for the SL Weekender were so funny I actually fell off my seat reading it on the train home. That was when we knew we had somebody special. When it came to painting a word-picture, Alastair was nonpareil. There will never be another like him and racing was lucky to have him.

Geoff Duffield – God bless you Ally. Feel like I've been hit by a sledge hammer.

Mark Jeffries – I am so very sad to hear about Alastair's passing. He'll be greatly missed by all those who knew him. He was a lovely bloke and such good company. I remember for a while he was living in Camberwell and we'd sometimes travel into work together from Denmark Hill Station. An excellent and witty writer whose columns I always enjoyed reading. My sincerest condolences to all his family, friends and colleagues. RIP Alastair.

John Barton – I'm extremely sad to hear that Alastair Down has died. Many of his columns moved me over the years, often to tears, as in one he wrote about the fire at the football stadium in Bradford. Another was the wonderful tribute he wrote in memory of my close disabled colleague Stuart Oliver when he died. Alastair faved terrible tragedy in later life that made it very hard for him.

It was lovely to see him being mischievous when interviewed at Cheltenham last week. I have many memories of conversations with him over the years – Alastair enriched our lives with his wonderful descriptive and moving writing. My sympathy goes to his family for their sad loss.

Mick Connaughton – I had heard from Simon Holt recently that Alastair was not a well man, but to say I am shocked by this sad news is the understatement of the year. A rare talent who had to endure more than his fair share of tragedy with the death of his daughter. He and the also deceased Neil Cook made a great team on the Life/Weekender and were close friends.

Fred Parsons – Oh that's awful news to hear the loss of such a towering character and at that age. Yes a brilliant writer and a wonderful and genial colleague. I fondly remember when he came to the Life we were at Farringdon and his passion and enthusiasm lit up the office. Such a legend and now a huge loss to the horseracing fraternity. So pleased that he was able to celebrate the honour of the Press room at Cheltenham being named after him. Sleep well dear Alastair.

Sharon Powell – That's absolutely tragic. I'm so upset to read this. Ally's 68 years was no innings whatsoever but I don't think the appalling incident with his daughter ever left him, these things don't go to your boots mate. A bon viveur, raconteur and generally nice guy, it's a great loss to the industry and his immediate family, who are no doubt still reeling from the events with Saskia. I'm almost shaking my head in disbelief, such is the shock at this news.

Benjamin Cox – I had spoken to Alastair earlier in the year after my father died and he did mention how his own health was very much on the edge with his arterial disease. Still such a shock though. I was working at Cheltenham last week and had a chat with him – as many said, he didn't look in great health but at the same time he was in very good form and made a presentation to connections of the race run in his honour. Feel so sad he is no longer with us just seven days later. He often mentioned the deep affection he had for Dave [Cox], so hopefully they are having a long overdue catch up.

Jim Sollis – So so sad. When I left the Life, he did a great send-off speech at Hodgson's [restaurant] for me. A great raconteur and larger than life character. I am so shocked.