

What happened to Likely Lad

LINKS – those things we forge as we plod ever onwards, bonding us with others, making some sort of sense of a life. And although the pearls, of course, are ever the thing, without the stringing all you are left with is a treacherous rolling of so many disparate balls, poised and lurking on the landing to tip you down those stairs with bumps and pain and bewilderment, dizzied by how it all could even have happened. Links: that mark of cohesion, the theme of continuity.

I always thought that the three links I had with my friend the actor Rodney Bewes (you remember him with love as by far the sweeter of The Likely Lads) were, respectively, Jerome K. Jerome, Keith Waterhouse and our mutual clubs. Because after nearly 30 years I am still, rather to my surprise, Jerome's sole biographer (and this in the year of his 150th birthday, and 120 years after first publication of the eternal Three Men In A Boat). For his part, Rodney has for ages been travelling the country with a hugely successful one-man-show which he adapted from the novel. We chat about this and other nonsenses in both the Garrick and the Chelsea Arts. Rodney also very memorably played best friend Arthur to Tom Courtenay's Billy Liar in Keith Waterhouse's wonderful 1963 film. Keith – also a member of both the Garrick and the Chelsea Arts, and whose funeral I attended some weeks ago – was a friend I held in huge esteem; I remember him telling me that filming was constantly interrupted because everybody kept on falling in love with Julie Christie.

Then, quite by chance, I discovered a much stronger link with Rodney than any of that: to wit, Hampstead. He had heard that I write this column (probably from me) and remembered with fondness the Ham&High from the 60s. "Oh – you lived in the area, did you?" I asked him, breezily. "Whereabouts?" Rodney sipped his claret (he's a claret man, Rodney). "Well now let me see ... 24 Belsize Avenue – basement. 11

After hearing that actor Rodney Bewes hadn't been to Hampstead since 1965, **Joseph Connolly** invites him back – to reminisce about how he turned the cinema upside down and old flame Frances from Frognal



Sentimental journey ... Rodney Bewes with Joseph Connolly at The Wells in Hampstead.

Picture by Nigel Sutton

Christchurch Hill – attic. 51 Flask Walk – front room. 5 Back Lane – back room, that one. Everything was bamboo in there; 19 shillings a week B&B. Shared it with a mynah bird. 73 Heath Street – another attic. 23 Thurlow Road, basement again. 24 Fellows Road ... Good grief! And he not only remembered all his old Hampstead showbiz chums – Peter O'Toole, John Hurt, Pete and Dud – but probably their blood groups, social security numbers and inside leg measurements, to boot. "I love Hampstead so much," he said with his customary wide-eyed sincerity. "And when were you last back there, then?" I wanted to know. "Mmm ... 1965, it must be." "Why leave it for more than 40 years if you love it so much?" "Well maybe," he said quite softly, "that's why."

I decided then and there that it was high time for him to take a sentimental journey: asked him to lunch at The Wells, in the heart of the Old Country. As it was a

weekday, we were downstairs: a generous room, with doomy black walls. Rodney entered looking like Clouseau being inconspicuous: white raincoat, red scarf and impenetrably black wraparound sunglasses (these toning with his suit, shirt and tie – all as black as the doomy walls). He was rosy with delight, though, having got off the tube at Belsize Park in order to have a wander. "There's an M&S in South End Green where the cinema used to be. I was sacked from that cinema for screening the first reel of The Trials Of Adolf Eichmann upside down. And the Coffee Cup's still here! That's lovely." In Flask Walk (where he used to use the old municipal baths) he'd just been chatting to a lady – never met her before, but he's a great little chatter – and when she learned that he was having lunch at The Wells, she said well in that case he must order the duck. And so he was, as a consequence, determined upon the duck. This lady also unaccountably put into his mind

an old flame from 1962, who he now decided he just had to meet again. Does he remember her name, her address? Of course he bloody does: Frances Ross-Duncan, from Frognal. Are you out there, Frances ...?

He had a glass of Chinon as a refreshing sharpener, and I a very bright and luscious rose Montepulciano. The idea was to go straight to the mains: he just couldn't wait for this duck, you see – barbaric breast, as it turned out, with savoy cabbage, baby carrots and bacon, celeriac and dauphinoise potatoes. The brilliance here was in the beautifully glossy blackcurrant and crème de cassis meat jus. He loved that – even ate a lot of it, which he doesn't often do. I had first class roasted rump of lamb, deeply flavoured and perfectly seasoned. Truly sensuous pommes puree with fennel, artichoke and properly peeled and al dente broad beans. Again, the jus was sensationally good and sticky: big hot plates and

FACTFILE

THE WELLS

30 Well Walk, Hampstead
Tel: 020-7794 3785

Open Monday to Friday
noon to 3pm, 6pm to 10pm,
Saturday noon to 3pm, 7pm to
10pm, Sunday noon to 4pm,
7pm to 9.30pm.

Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

Cost: About £70 for two
courses for two, with wine.

superbly presented – this is an excellent kitchen. And in order to welcome back Rodney to NW3 good and proper, we had a fine and memorable Bordeaux: Garraud Lalande de Pomerol 2004: not cheap at £39.75, but actually rather good value by restaurant standards – silky, just as you like it, with legs as long as a person with very long legs, and that properly lingering claret aftertaste: yum.

Rodney never went to school – not really. He was in bed with bronchitis and asthma until the age of 12, though three years later it was decided he needed better air than his home town of Bradford could offer ... and so to Highgate. Having displayed early talent, he found himself living in the PARADA Hostel (a primer for RADA) on Shepherds Hill. In order to earn money he washed up in Grosvenor House, Park Lane: three nights a week, 6pm to 6am, for 36 shillings a time. Then he would walk home to Highgate. "I loved it," he says. "I thought I was in heaven". He also loved acting all day, and was already on television in juvenile roles. Something of a likely lad, then.

Talking of which ... he has great memories of those seminal series, and still enjoys being associated with the hapless Bob Ferris. And so I asked him: whatever happened to the other Likely Lad? "Yes ... Jimmy

Bolam. I haven't seen him since 1976. There was no great falling-out, but I'm a bit annoyed with him at the minute because he won't allow terrestrial repeats because he thinks it will somehow diminish his work on New Tricks." Hm: Martin Shaw once pulled that one with The Professionals (to the great vexation, as I remember from my Flask Bookshop days, of Gordon Jackson). Rodney was talking lately to one of the writers, Dick Clement, who was musing upon where the two Lads might find themselves today: Terry Collier, he thought, would have made a fortune in scrap iron, while Bob and Thelma would now be the nouveau pauvre struggling middle class: God, it's a shame we can't get filming.

These days, Rodney lives very happily with his wife Daphne in Henley. They have four children – three of them 31-year-old triplets, all boys. Boats are now his passion – he has five, one of them an authentic skiff exactly like the one taken upon the Thames by J. Harris and George (to say nothing of the dog). Well okay, then ... we've had a damned good lunch, so all that remains to be done is the picture. On cue, ace Ham&High snapper Nigel Sutton wandered in. A few years ago he did the photography for my daughter Victoria's wedding, just down the road at Burgh House. And the reception? We had it in The Wells.

On our way up to The Flask (you can't do a nostalgic pilgrimage to The Flask) I pointed out where Peter Barkworth used to live – an interesting actor whom I knew fairly well. "Ah yes," chimed in Rodney. "He taught me at RADA." Dear me, dear me – links, you see: creating, over years, the tie that binds.

□ All previous restaurant reviews may be seen on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

An island vineyard in the Venetian lagoon

IN THE world of wine, Bisol is always associated with fizz: the company, still family run, has been making Prosecco since the 16th century and now offers some of the very best of Italy's – and increasingly the UK's – favourite sparkling wine.

But there's something new on the horizon. Bisol has just replanted a long-abandoned

vineyard on the island of Mazzorbo in the Venetian lagoon and, while the result will again be white, there will be no bubbles.

Though rarely heard of, there were a wealth of lagoon wines in the past, and some present survivors – a red from the market garden island of Sant'Erasmo, for example, generates plenty of local enthusiasm. The Mazzorbo project should spread interest much wider.

After six years' research into native grape varieties, the walled Scarpa Volo estate has been replanted with Dorona, reputedly the source of the doges' favourite wine.

What other more familiar grapes does it resemble, I asked Bisol's Michela da Bona as we walked through the tall trellises of vines. Hard to say, was the reply, though some had likened experimental results to Soave, with a salty edge. The wine is to

be called Venissa and the first commercial vintage – an anticipated 8,000 bottles – will be 2011.

But there's more than wine alone involved. The estate is owned by the Commune of Venice, which staged a competition for regeneration schemes. Bisol won.

So what is being created alongside the vines now is a plot of traditionally Venetian vegetables and a fish pond raising lagoon natives. Run-down buildings are being restored to become a small, chic hotel and the Veneto headquarters of the Slow Food movement. New is the glass-sided restaurant, to be ruled over by Venetian-born Paula Boudel, whose starred career includes a spell at Le Gavroche.

Company general manager and project mastermind Gianluca Bisol has long been fascinated by the Venetian lagoon and his

dream is to create a "food and wine island", returning to the roots of the culture of the city and its unique surroundings.

But there are challenges ahead. Last winter's aqua alta flooded the vineyard and workers were out rinsing away the salt immediately afterwards. There is no way Venissa will be a cheap, mass-market wine.

The Mazzorbo project is not Bisol's only venture downhill from its Prosecco vineyards on the edge of the Dolomites. It is also a partner in the nautical centre on green and quiet Certosa island, 10 minutes by vaporetto from San Marco, where it runs an art-themed modern hotel and a relaxed restaurant with very skilled cooking. Prices for both are modest compared to those in Venice itself.

We drank Bisol Prosecco all through lunch there, proving the wine's food friendliness and with

Crede's long-lasting spiral of fine bubbles perfect for toasting the Venetian initiative.

Join in here: Bisol Prosecco – Jeio £9, Crede £14.25, Cartizze £22.50 – can be bought direct from Bibendum (www.bibendum-wine.co.uk) and fine independent merchants. It is also available by the glass or bottle in many bars and

restaurants locally, including The Lansdowne, The Albert and Sardo Canale in Primrose Hill; the Red Lion and Sun, Highgate; the Rosslyn Arms, Hampstead; The Cuban and Market, Camden Town; the Lord Stanley, Kentish Town; The Queens, Crouch End; The Clifton, Maida Vale.

LIZ SAGUES



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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ To catch the dust when you are drilling, attach an envelope to the wall using masking tape, just beneath the point where you are working. The dust will collect in the envelope and not on the floor. Or, use a small hand vacuum to collect the dust as you drill!

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