

1. Introduction – from Dick

If we are categorising ourselves today, I suppose I am one of the Ilkley Playhouse contingent. I met Wal shortly after he, Nick and the boys moved to Yorkshire when he and I were cast together in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* in 1997 when he played Sir Robert Chiltern and I was Lord Goring. But I think - and I hope I have this right – that I also fall into the 'close friend' group. Somewhere along the line, and I really can't say when or how it was, Wal and of course Nick and later Laurie and Fin became good friends; very good friends. I know my experience wasn't unique and I'm guessing that, in many cases, whether you performed on stage with Wal or not, many of you here will have experienced much the same thing.

I last saw him a couple of weeks ago. We were in early rehearsals for Schiller's *Mary Stuart* (he was the Earl of Leicester; I was Lord Burghley – we didn't always play aristocrats, in our last play together *The Weir*, he played an Irish barman and I was an estate agent) and afterwards he suggested a drink. He, Yvette Huddleston and I went to the Crescent Hotel; good friends enjoying a pleasant hour's conversation ranging, if I remember rightly, over theatre, literature and, I think politics. We stepped out onto the pavement outside and I left with a wave and crossed Brook Street towards home completely unaware, as P G Wodehouse would put it, that 'fate was quietly slipping the lead into the boxing glove'.

I hope that that doesn't sound flippant – or indeed unfeeling. I have looked at a lot of comment in social media and elsewhere about Wal's death and one of the two main things almost everyone spoke about was a profound sense of shock at the suddenness and finality of his passing. Forgive me in what is a celebration of Wal's life if I articulate how stunned we are by his death. As always with sudden death, we didn't have the chance to say what we would have wanted to say to Wal; to tell him how much we enjoyed being with him, how he made us laugh – or cringe with his humour, how inspiring we was. How much we loved him. We can't tell him now – we can do the next best thing and spend the day telling each other.

The other thing everyone said was what a good man Wal was. Look at the tributes and see what people – and how many – have written; 'kind', 'generous', 'gentle', 'erudite', 'articulate', 'funny'. This isn't people being nice because he's gone. At a time when man's relations with his fellow man become ever more self-interested and remote, Wal was the opposite - warm and inclusive, never happier than in the company of others – working with them in the theatre, talking to them about their lives for the books he and Yvette wrote together, teaching them, making contacts, writing drama, playing sports. In his element sitting in his own or someone else's kitchen eating, drinking wine and talking – always talking. He delighted in culture, fellowship and harmony.

I don't, in this short 'curtain raiser' have time to talk about all the things Wal did – you'll hear some of that from other speakers anyway, but a couple of *vignettes*;

Firstly Wal's cooking. I was a late comer to Facebook and, missing the point perhaps had a tendency in my early posts towards heavy political content. I see now that it was not light reading and my eldest sister complained that my posts were always miserable. My response ran as follows;

“Stung by my sister’s rebuke for not saying anything positive on FB let me say that one of the nicest things to happen to me over the last few days was Walter Swan’s apple and parsnip soup – truly majestic”

Secondly, Wal’s wit. Some years ago a group from the Playhouse went to a ‘singalong’ showing of the *Sound of Music*. Audience participation was encouraged, not only in singing along but also in costume (I was a von Trapp child in altered curtains, Wal was, I think, a nun) and commentary on the action in the film. I have to say that many of the audience drank freely at the bar and most of the comment tended towards the brutish and coarse. However we reached the point in the film where, prior to the mother Abbess singing *Climb Every Mountain*, Maria, torn between her love for Captain von Trapp on one hand and her love for God on the other, agonised as to whether she should return to the Abbey or stay with the Captain and his family. We waited in breathless anticipation for her decision and the ensuing song when from the stalls a voice shouted “Don’t do it Maria; it’s a von Trapp”

This is an overview. Wal did so much, inspired so many. One can’t do justice here to how many lives he touched. He loved and was loved and Nick, Laurie and Fin can be comforted by this. When we consider what he was and what he left behind, we can consider all those in this room and those beyond who can’t be with Wal today, and when we do this perhaps we can adopt for Wal the inscription to Sir Christopher Wren in St Paul’s Cathedral and say “*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*”; if you seek his monument, look about you.

2. Niccola (Walter's wife)

Thank you so much to everyone for coming today and sharing our celebration of Walt's life. Thank you to everyone who can't be here and for all the messages sent from around the world.

I met Walt in 1975, 39 years ago, and I expected to spend the rest of my life with him. We were both about to reduce our work so we could spend much more time together and we had so many plans, many of which involved reconnecting with many of our very good friends and family who we haven't seen so much of recently.

I could talk for days about my dear husband. But I'm going to try and focus on four main themes. I want to talk about his love of his friends, his love of words, his love of his family, and his love of me.

Walt had a gift for friendship. He wasn't always the best at keeping in touch with people on a regular basis, but when he met people that he loved he could pick up again as if there had been no gap. He was so sociable, warm, welcoming and kind. There was nothing he liked better than welcoming people to our home, sitting with some food and a glass of wine, chatting, probably about books, films or plays, and telling his terrible jokes, cracking puns and making everybody laugh and groan.

Although we did groan, he was the cleverest wordsmith I know. Amongst all of the great sadness is the sense that, whilst he never sought fame and fortune, his writing deserved a wider audience. He was very modest about his talents and really didn't push his work as he might have done - but some of this may still happen due to the efforts of some wonderful friends and family. We will preserve his writing.

The fact that there are so many people here today is a tribute to his talent for friendship. He would so like to have been here to talk with you over a glass of wine and to have fun. We had been planning his 60th birthday party for December, and you would have been the guest list. I just wish he was here.

Although it may seem a small thing across the whole of Walt's life, the combination of his love of friends and words, his teaching skills and his sociability all came together in our book group which we both loved very much. Walt had the ability to analyse and explore, off the cuff, with no preparation, and in a very engaging way. He had such perceptive, sensitive and interesting insights – I was often in awe. And he could knock off a cryptic crossword or a Sudoku in no time; he had a very fine brain and I genuinely admired his wit and intellectual capability.

There are a great many members of our families here today. As you know, Walt came from Scotland and we were there in January visiting lots of family in Carluke and Lanark. Thank you so much for travelling today in such numbers.

With Walt's more immediate family, we were all together last December for his mum's 80th birthday. It was such a happy occasion, and Walt was the life and soul of the party, making a loving and funny speech, taking photographs and dancing. I'm so pleased we were all gathered together for that very special occasion.

On the morning of the day Walt died, a new family member was born. I met 11 day old Molly yesterday and she's here now. She will be extra special.

Our sons, Laurie and Finlay are both going to speak for themselves about Walt as a dad. It goes without saying how immensely proud he was of his boys and we have so many photographs of him standing proudly with them. Walt wanted us to have children more than I did initially. We nearly had more and he would have loved a daughter to go with our beautiful sons. We were so looking forward to grandchildren when the time was right. When Laurie and Fin were first born, Walt would come home and pick them up and wake them even if I'd only just got them to sleep – so he could play with them, gaze at them and love them.

I just want to say very briefly how wonderful my boys have been over the last couple of weeks; our grief is extreme and yet we have got through this together (with Jess and Kirsty at their sides). Walt was so proud of his sons, and so am I.

And finally a bit about me. I was only 16 when we met in 1975 so Walt was a massive influence on me. I was a child really when I look back and so he has helped mould me and make me who I am. It genuinely was love at first sight. Our eyes met across a crowded room in the Jazz Club in Colchester. He was one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen and I think he remained an incredibly handsome man. He was a bit drunk and he said my eyes were as blue as the sea. We were together from that point on. Our first date was to see the film of The Jungle Book and we had a Chinese meal for which Walt didn't have enough money. We agreed that we would get married within three weeks of meeting although we didn't actually do it until 1980, five years later.

I'm not saying it was perfect all the time but our love was really deep. I have lost my lifelong partner, my companion and the love of my life. Walt, I'm going to miss you so much. There was so much for us still to do together and we had so much to look forward to. Walt's influence has touched many people. He will be a part of us forever. His loss is almost unbearable and I will always miss him.

One of Walt's favourite musicians was Joni Mitchell. We went to a concert of hers in the early days. This song is called 'All I want' and it's the first track on 'Blue', Walt's favourite album.

3. Jimmy (younger brother)

Walt was 12 years older than me, so we didn't have the conventional brother relationship that he had with Jack.

My first memories of Walt were when we lived in Hong Kong, My Dad had an Army posting there and Jack & Walt had stayed behind in England. My sisters Karen, Gill and I would always look forward to their visits, myself in particular as being the youngest I was always made a fuss of by them both.

My Mum and Dad reminded me of a story of a time Walt came to visit us in Hong Kong and, as was fashionable in the late 60s early 70s, had grown his hair quite long, which was a little too long for my parents' liking. En route home from the airport, they took him straight to the barbers for a nice army short back and sides, he didn't even get a chance to unpack his suitcase.

When my Dad left the Army, we moved from Colchester to the other side of Essex to Harlow. My memories of Walt's visits to Harlow were playing football together at the field at the back of our house and him reading to me - the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings were the main books I remember. I think we gained an equal amount of pleasure from this.

And it was his visits to Harlow where we first met Nic and she has been a big part of our family ever since.

My teenage memories of Walt were him taking me to Trinity School in the holidays where we could use the sports facilities all to ourselves. He even gave me a driving lesson in his old mini in the school car park, which I felt was pretty cool at the time for a 14 year old. I don't think that he was too impressed with my driving skills as he never offered again.

It was also around the same time that Walt gave me a half set of golf clubs that I would take over to the school field to practice with. And so began my passion for golf. So I have Walt to thank for that.

Over the years we would spend many hours on the golf course, playing at Piltdown in East Sussex when he lived in Barcombe, and also at my home course in Harlow. We would also play at Ilkley and Otley where Walt was a member. I will really miss our rounds of golf together.

Such was Walt's competitive nature he introduced the Swan golf trophy to our games, inviting family members to play. Fittingly he won the trophy last time we played and we will now have to rename it the Walt Swan trophy and continue to play for it, and Laurie and Fin will have to start having lessons.

I last saw Walt at our Mum's 80th birthday party in December. And I can still see him now, with his camera attached because of his love of photography taking family shots that he would later post on Facebook for all to see. And in the last week it's been a great comfort to all the family and me in particular looking through his photos on Facebook.

Walt was very proud of his Scottish roots and loved visiting our relatives in Lanark, Wishaw, Carluke and the Forth. In particular our aunts and uncles whom he would like to take to lunch and generally look after.

One more thing I would like to say is when Laurie and Fin were young boys I would notice how Walt would speak to them, explaining to them if they did something wrong and why it was wrong, equally praising them for good behaviour, how he would read to them and even explain to them his corny jokes. Laurie & Fin have grown into lovely young men who are a credit to both Walt and Nic. I adopted the same methods with my son Ollie and I'm now reaping the benefits for that. He is out of the same mould as Laurie & Fin and I have Walt to thank for that.

My lasting memory of Walt will be of a loving, caring, kind, generous family man and I'm very proud to be his brother.

4. Tony Wright (friend from school days)

My Friend Wal

What an honour it is to be asked to speak at this celebration of such a great man. When we first met England had just won the World Cup. He was my oldest friend and I find this very difficult. I was once given a piece of advice that at such emotional times have an image in your head that you can call upon to calm you. Mine today is on the CRGS playing fields when we had our first Rugby lesson. It was chaos but Wal was in the middle of the action. At one point he got the ball but was tackled by Nigel, a squirt of a boy. But it made no difference to Wal as he set off down the pitch with Nigel hanging round his neck. They disappeared into the distance, Wal with that huge grin on his face as he scored the try. That was the start of countless times that Wal had me laughing.

As you gather Wal was big for his age. Indeed on our first day we were sure a 5th Year boy had mistakenly wandered into the wrong room. He had hair growing in places that we didn't know men should have hair (it was many years later that I realized that actually they shouldn't!).

My second memory was that he told us he was called Walter. "Sure, but what's your real name?" But very soon I came to love that name especially when I understood the importance of its family connection. As a teacher you meet kids with every imaginable name but I have never met another Walt. He was unique but that's not the only way he was remarkable.

Within a week he was doing outrageous impersonations of our odious form teacher, Harry Scarlett. The humour was evident as well as a craving to perform to anyone prepared to join an appreciative audience.

My final early memory relates to the fact that I sat in the same line of inter-connected desks. On that first day my desk suddenly began to shake as if a minor earthquake was hitting the room. In fact it was Wal concentrating and letting his leg jig up and down rapidly. "Stop it!" Yes Wal did have the potential to irritate.

All these characteristics stood the test of time.

But none of these are actually what endeared me to Wal. Along with many others he had the ability to make me feel important. To be honest it never failed to amaze me that he allowed me to be part of his life then and in the years that have followed. He loved those school days and particularly the way the Grammar School gave him the chance to shine –academically, in performance and on the sports field. He grew as a person, as a wit, as a leader. It could have been predicted in that first week that he would end up in the Sixth Form as Head Boy and his name would appear in gold letters on the Oxbridge boards in the main hall. But thankfully he stopped growing physically and we caught him up. But to me he was always a Big Man.

These were days of endless fun, driving around in John Francis's 3 wheeler car shouting "Sweat Boys" at startled pedestrians. No. I have no idea why. Drinking

Double Diamond in the Hospital Arms, imagining we were irresistible to the girls from the High School, playing every sport possible and laughing, endlessly laughing.

One highlight of the week was the Jazz Club on a Sunday evening. It was here one time that we were outraged that he shunned our stunning company to chat up.....in retrospect I suspect it might have been the other way round....yes, chat up an attractive High School girl but one who was years his junior. Scandalous! But in young Niccola, he had met his match. She could equal his intellect, she shared his sense of fun but was not afraid to challenge his nonsense. Challenge is a nice way of saying disagree. Yes, they could bicker for England –another characteristic that the residents of Ilkley will testify has survived the years! But the foundations of their love had been laid.

He and Nick so readily made my wife Katy feel welcome and then us 4 gradually grew to 9 as boys –only boys -arrived. How proud he was of Laurie and Fin and all their achievements. But he also took such an interest in our boys and I was delighted he became Edward's godfather. We have enjoyed the Swan Family company on many holidays and visits especially skiing where Walt would wait patiently at the bottom of the slope as we scratched our way towards him. Wal was always identifiable by...how shall I put it... his rather noticeable skiwear.

But then I go back to those first days and recognize that what I saw has remained through the years.

He was undeniably unique.

He never stopped loving performing to a crowd. How he would have loved taking control today!

His great sense of humour never diminished (such as was annually shown in what have been both the best and the most ridiculous Christmas letters).

And for the rest of **my** life I will always look up to such a big man who was generous enough to let me into **his** life. How grateful I am that I have enjoyed a lifetime of being enriched by knowing Walter Swan.

5. Russell Burton (friend from university days)

I feel very humble to be talking on behalf of so many people who first came to know Walter J Swan after he arrived as a freshman at Hertford College, Oxford in September 1973. Over his 3 years there, friendships were built which forever thereafter enriched all our lives.

We may have called him Walter, Wally, Walt or Wal but *he* never changed. Of us all he retained his youthfulness the most.

I have a vivid image in my mind of Wally who seemed always to be either just about to grow a beard or just about to shave it off. He had a fine head of hair and indeed once sported a moustache. But beneath that hirsute appearance were the most natural smile, and eyes which always had a real sparkle, usually of mirth but often of mischievousness. Wally had a warmth which simply invited you to talk and laugh for hours on end. It is that which I and I am sure many of us will miss so much.

The tales from those early years are legendary and far too many to recount here but I am sure later we can tell a few! Mostly they revolved around Hertford College RFC which enjoyed the greatest success of its history, winning the University Championship in 1976 under Roger Parkin's captaincy but due in no small part to Wally's skill as a centre $\frac{3}{4}$. For many of us whether as players, bar stewards or spectators, rugby brought us together.

Wally represented all that is so good about Oxford – he did not come from a privileged background but his natural intelligence, wit, love of life and of sport meant he was totally at ease there and excelled in all he did. He was and still is central to all our best memories of those years which include the point at which we first met a beautiful young girl who followed him from Colchester and became the focus of his life and such an important part of our lives.

However, it might not quite have gone according to the script all those years ago had Niccola made it back to Oxford bus station late one evening. Our Mods celebrations in the Royal Oak on Woodstock Road were in full flow until Wally and I ended up *in* the toilets but with our arms sticking *out* of the toilet through a broken window amidst a lot of broken glass. Not for the first time Wally escaped censure and others carried the can!

On another occasion Wally, Mark White and Pete Newman gained entry without buying tickets to a performance of "They Shoot Horses, Don't They" on the lawns of Trinity College. They got front row seats no less. The clue as to why this went wrong is that the performance started after 11pm on a Friday night. Pete felt unable to restrain himself from expressing his views on one of the actors which resulted in the three of them being asked to leave. They were offered a refund for tickets they had never even paid for. But instead of leaving they found their way to a marquee which was set out for the post-performance supper. Unable to remain silent they were soon ejected for a second time. There was to be no turning back this time for our intrepid inebriates but while history blurs the final line it surely had to be Wally who shouted as they left "by the way, there's no mustard in the ham sandwiches"!!

Walt always had a new idea on the go, be it a TV quiz show, a play, showing tourists around Bronte country, raising funds for charity by doing bike rides – the list is endless. He had unbounded enthusiasm for everything he did. The glass was never half empty or half full with Walt – it was overflowing.

His gift for speech and his huge capacity for remembering literature made him what he was. As an impromptu performer he started in the college bar at Hertford. He put on a solo song and dance routine at a rugby club dinner at the Randolph Hotel which would have done the West End proud. At Mark White's wedding he was called upon by the best man to say a few words about Mark and proceeded to give a magnificent unscripted performance, moving from table to table recounting suitable (or perhaps otherwise) episodes from M's past with Shakespearian mastery.

In more recent years the young Burton and Swan families shared some happy holidays in France and Ireland. On one of these on a boat trip around Lough Gill in WB Yeats country, Co Sligo, the skipper somewhat unwisely offered free drinks to anyone who could narrate a poem by Yeats. Unfortunately for the skipper Walt pretty much knew all WB Yeats works and a wonderful afternoon was enjoyed listening to him.

I would have liked to read just one of those poems, *The Lake Isle Of Innisfree*, but I fear I will not do it justice as Walt did then. So just the first verse perhaps?

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.
And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings
I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

Walt also joined me for a few days just after I had renovated my cottage in Co Mayo in 2007. He loved the scenery out in Connemara as we toured around and took in the occasional glass of Guinness. Amidst the glorious hills around Lough Doo (where a year or two later there was a wonderful picture of Walt and Nick taken) you could almost see the book or play or blockbuster TV series taking seed in his fertile mind. Later that day we ventured into a shop in Westport where Walt spied the most outrageous tartan patchwork waistcoat. He had to buy it there and then with a laugh and a huge smile on his face as he did so.

There was no affectation about Walt. He had an irrepressible sense of fun, the warmest of smiles and was a born entertainer. He was a true friend to all of us and he enriched all our lives more than I can express in mere words. I wish I could hand him this script now and ask him to rewrite it properly.

Thank you, Walt, for your love, encouragement, storytelling and for being the most wonderful friend. We miss you terribly but we will repay your friendship by promising to love and care for Nick, Laurie and Finlay in the weeks, months and years to come.

6. Finlay (younger son)

As I'm sure many of you know – Dad was something of an authority on the written and spoken word. I'm therefore very keen not to let him down over the course of the next few minutes. My dad was always able to just get up and speak – whatever the occasion. I'm very jealous of that skill now.

When I was trying to work out what I should say today, it felt impossible. How could I say everything that needed to be said about a man who meant so much to me, and to so many other people? The simple answer is that I can't. My dad was an amazing person, and the fact that he's gone just doesn't make sense to me. I'm still feeling numb and finding it very difficult to put what I'm feeling into words. It's going to take me a very long time to come to terms with what's happened.

Dad was a man of amazing talent and limitless enthusiasm. He will always be remembered by the people who loved him as a poet, a playwright, an actor, and a teacher – though perhaps not as a violinist. He was always there for me with love and support – and terrible jokes that I'm afraid might be hereditary. He was there through everything and I know he always wanted the best for me, Laurie and Mum. There were so many times when he made everything right just by being there.

Many of my earliest memories of Dad are of him reading to me and Laurie. He went the extra mile with us, and after reading us *The Hobbit*, somehow read us the entire *Lord of the Rings*, which he would do every night over the course of many months. His passion for literature kindled a life-long love of reading in both me and Laurie that has since spread to music, theatre and films. I truly believe that his time and love have made me a better and more cultured person.

Some of the happiest times I spent with Dad were when he would drive me back to university. Although my leaving home meant that we'd often not be able to see each other for a while, we wouldn't always talk. We'd just enjoy each other's company and be relaxed together. In those moments I felt that we just understood each other, in a way that was unique to him. I'm really going to treasure those moments when it was just the two of us together. We didn't need to say much, but when we did it was all the better for those moments of quiet understanding.

He was an amazing source of knowledge, especially when it came to literature. Whilst I was away travelling I finally read *Lord of the Flies* as Dad had bought me a copy for Christmas. I loved it, but I can't describe how sad I am that I can't talk to him about it. I just know that he will have had some special insight, or have noticed some key detail that had completely passed me by. I would love nothing more than to sit down and chat to him. I have so many regrets, not that I didn't show him the love he deserved, but that there are now so many unfinished projects that we always wanted to work on together. Dad always wanted me to explore my creative writing and I would have loved the chance to write with him.

He'd want me to stay strong, but the idea that I must now carry on without him seems unbearable. Luckily my dad spent his whole life surrounding himself with wonderful people, who are going to miss him almost as much as I will.

The next song is from the last album that Dad shared with me. At the time I thought that this first song was lovely, but since Dad died it has taken on a painful but beautiful new significance. This is "April" by the Leeds band *Hope and Social*. Be ready for a good cry.

7. Julia Ascott (friend from the middle years)

Wal, Wally, Walt or Walter – a man impossible to sum up in a few short minutes – son, husband, dad, uncle, brother, colleague, teacher, author, writer, poet, playwright, journalist, actor, director, photographer, musician, sportsman, fundraiser – the list is almost endless but perhaps most importantly, he was a very dear friend - a Prince among men.

I first met Wal when I was 17. I was a member of the Mitre Players – the dramatic section of the Old Boys of Trinity School in Croydon. We were putting on a production of “Once in a Lifetime” and were short of a leading man. Into the breach, steps handsome new English teacher at Trinity in his first teaching job and eager to impress. So eager, in fact that he agreed to tutor me for my A level English Literature exam, to earn a bit of spare cash for him & Nick – newly married. I listened attentively, gazing at this sexy (sorry boys – he was!), passionate, inspiring, young teacher with a mop of dark wavy hair, cheeky smile and lovely blue eyes. I remember little about the set text now but with his help I achieved the grade I needed and ventured off to uni.

Wal continued to be an active member of the Mitre Players, serving as Secretary on the committee, acting and directing in a variety of plays and writing comedy sketches for revues. He was an exceptionally talented and intelligent man – and during this time honed his skills to become an accomplished actor, a creative, enthusiastic and inspiring director and a brilliant and funny writer – all talents which many of you will have witnessed and enjoyed. He also joined the Old Boys rugby & cricket clubs and the golf society as well as getting fully immersed in the social side which I am pleased to say Nick was allowed to join in with!

He made friends easily and had many of them. One such friend was Robbie Hammond - a fellow sportsman and thespian and on my return from Uni I started going out with Rob. This began an enduring friendship with Nick and Wal which involved plenty of alcohol, meals, laughter, alcohol, days out, holidays and alcohol. The 3 of them, taught me to ski – Wal absolutely loved his skiing and was very good at it. I clearly remember the encouragement, patience and clear instruction Wal gave me and soon I was able to keep up.

The following year, Laurie joined us on his first ever ski trip and we all shared a tiny apartment. Wal had an amazing brain which required constant stimulation and in the evenings, instead of the usual après ski, he decided to teach me to play bridge – the boys took it very seriously but Nick & I didn’t and much to their annoyance we giggled at the boy’s competitive nature – the giggling has continued for years and was mostly instigated by Wal’s witticisms, ridiculous puns and very sharp sense of humour. He had a very special ability to make others laugh – you could see his brain ticking over, searching for the next gag! This challenge made him happy.

The Mitre Players began the tradition of taking their summer production on tour to a theatre firstly in Falmouth and then later to the wonderful open air Minack Theatre, a place Wal really loved. The tours were fantastic fun and involved lots of late night partying and dressing up – Wal was obviously in his element and fortunately Laurie was still too young to be embarrassed by the sight of his Dad compering a spoof awards ceremony dressed only in his Mum’s swimming costume!

The Swan’s moved to Barcombe in East Sussex as a result of Nick’s latest promotion at work. Wal was incredibly supportive of Nick’s career and hugely proud of her success and achievements. Fin was born and Wal’s teaching took a backseat as he spent more time at home

with the boys, developing his writing when he could. I introduced Wal and Nick to my future husband, Marcus – we married and had 2 sons of our own and the friendship continued despite the miles between us. Marcus and Wal shared a common interest in all things sporty and enjoyed the occasional round of golf together.

The Swans and Ascotts have shared several very happy holidays to France and Cornwall and I very much hope this will continue Nick. After their move to Yorkshire, we continued to follow them about and have stayed in Burley many times. We saw Wal perform at the Ilkley Playhouse and walked across Wal's beloved Yorkshire moors together. Wal was always so welcoming and hospitable and keen to hear our news – he was genuinely interested and interesting! He loved having a houseful of people.

Wal has been a great friend to us. He had a kind heart, always had an encouraging word to say, showed great humility, was blessed with many talents and an exceptionally sunny nature and saw the funny side of any situation. We are truly proud to have known him and he has enriched our lives. His life was too short but it was a life well lived - Nick, Laurie, Fin - take comfort in the knowledge that he was loved by so many people and will be missed by us all.

My husband, Marcus is not able to be here today due to work commitments but I hope it's OK if I end with this short tribute from him; These are his words...

It was my privilege to know Walt and I'm sorry I can't be there to share the many stories about a genuine and proper fellow. Everyone is unique but few more so than Walt. The expression 'They broke the mould' was written for him. Engaging, genuinely funny and had an opinion about everything, whether or not he knew anything about it. He was warm and welcoming and the luckiest golfer I've ever played. He allowed me more and more shots on my handicap and still he always won. I never worked out how he did that!

He was intelligent, thoughtful, reflective and confident, yet liked the assurance of those closest to him; he was comfortable in his own skin. He complemented these traits with a splendid dollop of eccentricity, which made him an extremely endearing character.

He has left us and we are much the poorer for it. I know though, he would want us to be positive and move forward. He would want us to hold his family close and support them, and we will.

We thank him for what he has given us, for what he has meant to us and for what he still means to us today and in the future.

A truly top bloke! We loved you Wal.

8. Yvette Huddleston (writing partner)

I first met Walter in 2002 at Ilkley Playhouse, not long after I moved up to Yorkshire, when we acted together on a celebration of Shakespeare's work. He was a very accomplished actor and I remember in particular his intelligent and compelling interpretation of a speech from *Richard III* – it was delivered with great panache and energy in that wonderful voice with a clear understanding of the text and how to convey its meaning to the audience. In conversations in the pub afterwards I was impressed by the depth and breadth of his literary knowledge and also by his witty repartee, awful puns notwithstanding.

We quickly discovered we had a lot in common – not least the fact that we were both writers and storytellers. And what a talented writer Walter was. One of the first pieces of his writing that he showed me was *Shadow of Love*, a superb screenplay about the later life and loves of Charlotte Brontë – the quality of the writing was outstanding and as a piece of drama it was totally compelling. It was partly through our discussions about *Shadow of Love* that our creative collaboration began and out of our close friendship grew a very fruitful writing partnership.

We wrote many features together for various newspapers and magazines as well as two books, two radio plays and three stage plays, the most recent of which was a new adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, a novel Walter loved and knew inside out, staged at the Playhouse last summer before transferring to the Minack Theatre in Cornwall where it played to sold out audiences every night. Walter loved the Minack and it was a very special place for us. We acted there together in *The Jungle Book* eleven years ago, an experience which cemented our friendship; he was absolutely brilliant as the Reverend John Hale in the Playhouse's award-winning production of *The Crucible* in 2009 and in 2011 we co-directed Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, one of Walter's favourite plays of all time.

We acted and directed together many times. We created murder mystery scenarios together – which were always peppered with Walter's characteristic humour – did a half-hour comic version of *Hamlet*, and co-ordinated contributions for the Ilkley Literature Festival fringe including putting on a couple of 24-hour plays. I have a wonderful memory of the two of us sitting up half the night with a laptop at my kitchen table putting together a script from the devised pieces the actors had come up with earlier in the evening and being almost hysterical with tiredness. We had so much fun but realised it was time to go to bed when what we were writing stopped making sense – prompting more hysteria.

There was never any problem in getting people to support us in these theatre projects – and that was because everyone wanted to work with Walter. He created such a lovely, warm environment for people to be creative in. Kindness meant a lot to Walter and he absolutely lived his life by that principle – he was generous, gentle, sensitive, patient and inclusive. He always saw the good in people and believed that everyone had something to offer.

Another of Walter's many talents was playing the violin and he once persuaded me to sing Irish folk songs, with his violin accompaniment, for an old people's Christmas party at the Queen's Hall in Burley. It was a typical act of kindness on his part – the entertainment that was supposed to have been provided for the event had for some reason fallen through and Walter had volunteered to fill the gap. As well as the songs, Walter also adopted his 'Irish comedian' persona and told some fantastically silly jokes to the delighted audience – again so characteristic of the man, spreading sunshine and happiness wherever he went.

Of all the plays Walter and I acted in together the two that we agreed stood out for us were *The Night Season* by Rebecca Lenkiewicz, a play we both loved, and Conor McPherson's *The Weir* – both happen to be set in rural Ireland. At the times we were rehearsing those plays our working days were enlivened by the fact that we would conduct most of our conversations in 'Oirish' in order to practise our accents.

We both joined a local poetry group, the Wharfedale poets, in 2012 and Walter loved the group. He had written a lot of poetry when he was younger – and I have read some of it, it is wonderful – but had not had much time to spend on it more recently and was so pleased to be writing it again. He was a great poet and produced some beautiful new poems over the last two years. As a group we were planning an anthology – to which Walter had contributed some lovely work – and the book, to be published soon, will now be dedicated to his memory.

Walter and I had an incredibly harmonious and easy working relationship and I can honestly say that we hardly ever had any 'artistic differences' because we were so completely on the same wavelength. On the very rare occasions that we did have a slight difference of opinion it was always quickly and amicably resolved through discussion – and always with good humour and mutual respect. Walter was brimming with ideas, passionate and enthusiastic; we always had so much to talk about. We were happy in each other's company and very lucky to have experienced that kind of empathy. It meant our creative partnership was not only extremely productive but also hugely enjoyable. We made each other laugh – and we laughed a lot.

Our days out in the Yorkshire Dales, working first on our series of features for the *Yorkshire Post* and then on the two books we wrote together, were some of the happiest times of my working life. Walter had a great sense of adventure and those mini-expeditions into the landscape that we both loved, meeting and chatting to local people, really were joyful voyages of discovery. And Walter captured them all not only in his wonderful lyrical writing but also his stunning photographs. We were planning more creative projects together – in particular a play about the relationship between the poet WB Yeats and his muse Maud Gonne. It was a project close to both our hearts but especially to Walter's who loved Yeats' poetry and was able to recite it beautifully at the drop of a hat. We were both very much looking forward to working on it together.

Walter affected the lives of everyone he met in an entirely positive way. He was very rarely downbeat, very much a half-glass-full person – and we enjoyed many glasses, usually of red wine, together. He absolutely lived life to the full – savouring every moment of it and everything he did, he did wholeheartedly. Walter made my life so much richer in so many ways and it is now, and always will be, so much poorer without him. He taught me so much as a director, actor, writer – and as a human being. He was my soulmate, my dear, sweet, lovely best friend. I loved him very much and I will remember him and miss him for the rest of my life. We all wanted him to stay with us for much longer but he will have given all of us some very special memories and they can never be taken away from us.

There is so much more I could say but I want to give the last word to Walter – which I think he would appreciate – and read you this beautiful poem he wrote some years ago which considers what it is we leave behind when we go.

Yeats' Tower

I want to build a tower, high –
The higher to be further seen.
And build, I must, until I die,
To show what I have been.

The higher that I build my tower,
The more my vision claims its own.
And build, I must, with every hour.
I build my tower alone.

My hands shape every humble brick
And lay them to my own design.
As swiftly as the seconds tick
I make the tower mine.

In death, the wind will scatter my
Mere ashes to the earth below –
But having built my tower high,
My ashes further blow.

To mingle with compelling clay
About the land I once could see.
Having built my tower today,
Tomorrow builds on me.

9. Graham Smith (Chairman of Ilkley Playhouse)

Ladies and gentlemen, I was honoured when Niccola, Laurie and Finlay asked me to say a few words today in two capacities; firstly as a Playhouse colleague of Walter and secondly as a family friend.

As everyone here today will know the Playhouse was Walter's main interest in life outside of his family. In the last 17 years, since he and his family arrived in Yorkshire, he has appeared in over 30 plays, directed at least another 10 and during his tenure as artistic director he played a key role in selecting and casting over 30 plays. It is difficult to select favourites but I think that most people I have spoken to agree that the performance of *Wuthering Heights* to sell out audiences at the Minack Theatre, a play which Walter co-wrote with Yvette, was possibly the highlight of his theatre career.

When he decided to retire as artistic director, the trustees were delighted that he accepted the post of creative development manager with a brief to making the Playhouse a vibrant hub for arts and cultural activities in Ilkley. His brief was just turning into reality since we now have regular daytime classes, comedy nights, classical music and jazz concerts and cinema screenings.

The Playhouse will not be the same without him but I am sure that he would have wanted everyone associated with it to continue to build on the foundations that he has put in place. Later this year the Playhouse intends to put on its own tribute to Walter so I hope that when the date is confirmed you will all come along to continue the celebration of Walter's life.

With regard to being a family friend, my wife Diane, my son Mark and myself were the first people to meet the Swans when they moved up to Yorkshire from East Sussex since they moved into the house next door. From the very first day we became close friends and along with other residents of Moor Lane, in particular the Wright family, we will all look back on the years we socialised together with affection and joy.

My son Mark was particularly impressed that we had a new neighbour who was a script writer for Cilla Black on *Blind Date*. I perhaps wasn't quite as impressed by this but I was impressed by Walter's first performance in the Moor Lane charity carol choir. Playhouse members may not know it, because I do not think that any musicals were performed during the years Walter acted, but he had a very good voice and could also play the violin, although I will admit that was not quite up to the standards of his directing and acting.

One of the most endearing characteristics of Walter was that he was always positive and I would like to take this opportunity to plant a seed of positivity for the future.

As Yvette was quoted as saying in the Gazette, Walter loved words and used them beautifully in his journalism, playwriting, poetry and short stories. Niccola, Laurie and Finlay have been reflecting over the last week as to how they could combine this love of words with a lasting tribute to Walter and they have decided that they would like to try and initiate an annual creative writing competition. The exact details of how it would be run and who it would be open to have still to be decided but in order to start the process the family have asked me to advise you that any donations received today will be used to fund this initiative.

I hope that you will be generous in your support since I am sure Walter would be delighted that in some way, no matter how small, he was able to encourage people to develop their writing skills for the benefit of others.

I cannot think of a better way to end this eulogy than by quoting the comment made in the editorial column of the Ilkley Gazette; "Walter's many and varied good deeds and involvement in the community are an inspiration to us all"

10. Laurie (older son)

My Dad is such an important part of who I am and that will never change. The memory of him will continue to guide me for the rest of my life. I know how much he loved me and that will always give me strength.

Dad will be my role model in so many ways. He always had time for other people and his most important characteristics were his generosity and warmth. He had an incredible number of friends but also went out of his way to be kind to people he didn't know. Spending so much time thinking about him has made me fully understand the importance of these things, and I want to be closer to him in the way I live my life.

He was the most loving dad. When Fin and I were very young he spent most of his time at home with us. He made this decision at the expense of his career when he was obviously capable of achieving so much. I have so many happy memories of my childhood and fortunately we have wonderful photos and videos to take me straight back to those times. Dad used to carry me (and then Fin) around everywhere on his back in a bright red baby carrier and I've spent a lot of time looking at photos of us - we were so happy together.

He was always so natural and caring with children. One of the most upsetting thoughts for me is that he didn't live long enough to see my children (he probably missed them by a few years!). He would have been brilliant. That sadness is never going to leave me, but my children will grow up knowing all about him and will still think of him as their granddad.

My Dad is responsible for my name, which, despite some early doubts, I like a lot. I was named after the author Laurie Lee. It's only in the last couple of years that I have read Laurie Lee novels and poetry for the first time, and I love it. In his writing there is a deep appreciation of nature, which is something that I share with my Dad.

Of all of my Dad's achievements outside of the family, I am most proud of his teaching. He was exceptionally talented and had the ability to inspire people through his enthusiasm and insight. As his son I only occasionally took advantage of this. Last year we saw Othello together and beforehand I asked him to briefly run through the key themes. Despite not having seen the play for many years he gave the most eloquent summary imaginable. I'm not sure that I've met anyone else who had quite that ability. It was a nice feeling to be so impressed by my own Dad.

My Mum is an incredible person and she has been unbelievably strong in the last two weeks. Mum – I'm very proud of you. I have no doubt that you will lead a fulfilling and happy life for many decades to come, and I'm looking forward to being part of it.

This has been horrendous for all of us, but I want to thank everyone who has been there for us in the last two weeks. We have a lot of great friends and that has helped so much. I have found it very uplifting to join together with so many people, some whom I barely knew before, and remember all of the great things about my Dad. He was a special person and we will never forget him.

Dad – thank you for everything. I'm so proud to be your son.