

Bert Banham, 4 April 1918 – 13 January 2015, remembered by John Avery

During the middle 1990s Felicity and I joined the Charing Guild of Players, Felicity acting and me backstage with only a little experience.

It was there I met Bert in his late 70s, ramrod straight and having a distinctive deep voice.

For the next fourteen years I worked with him and a small band of others two evenings a week and also during the days prior to opening night ensuring each set was up to Bert's standard.

He taught me a great deal. Whatever problems came along he always but always found a solution.

He had boundless energy. At the start of each set build we carried from the outside store onto the stage large wooden 8' x 4' flats, him in front and me at the back and I can tell you that for most of the time he practically carried me onto the stage as well.

He was in his 80s when we backstage lads saw him after one play straddled across two beams on his hands and knees high above the stage hanging scenery we might use in a future play. There was no stopping him.

After each session we could be found in the Royal Oak, as it was called then, having a pint or two chatting until chucking out time. I often got him talking about his four and a half years as a prisoner of war in Germany. He would invariably relate amusing stories until I was able to steer him on to more serious matters.

One tale I especially recall. As many will know, in January 1945 in the middle of a severe winter he and his 800 fellow prisoners left their camp and were made to walk 1500k with others across Europe because of the advancing Russians. They arrived at a new camp nearly four months later and after a very few weeks Bert woke up one morning to find his captors gone. The Yanks were on their way. Almost at once he and some of his mates made a bee line for the equipment store where Bert helped himself to something he had always admired. A pair of jack boots.

After three or four weeks of strutting around in his new shiny boots and fed on American rations he was flown home in an old Dakota piloted, he said, by a lad who looked no older than 14. Coming into land at Blackbushe, I think it was, part of the landing gear failed to lock and on being told to take up the crash position he covered his hands behind his head, leant forward, looked down at his beloved footwear and to his horror discovered he was wearing two left boots. He remembered little of the rough landing.

After leaving the Guild some five years ago we continued to meet regularly over a drink always in deep conversation and never less than three hours at a time until he became less active. I miss those times.

Before I finish I would like to pay tribute to Anton. He, of course, always cared ABOUT his dad but during the last few years not only did he care about him but always cared FOR him ensuring all his medical needs were met and he was safe and as comfortable as possible, a task not always easy knowing Bert's fiercely independent nature.

For my part I enjoyed so much those times spent in his company and valued his friendship.

Although he is now no longer with us I have many happy memories of a good friend and of a man I admired.