

Obituaries

Eric Morton 1945–2019 *An Appreciation*

Members of the Regional Furniture Society will be greatly saddened to hear of the death of Eric Morton after a six-year valiant fight against cancer. Both Eric

and his wife Lyn were long-standing members of the Society and were regular attendees at meetings and visits. In 2011 they hosted a visit to their home, where members were treated to a remarkable collection of regional clocks from the North of England, many of the long case clocks lining the walls three deep. Not only did Eric have a superb horological understanding of the



Eric showing Peter Brears the North Eastern court cupboard, shortly after he had collected it.

many clocks in his collection, but he also explained their social significance in terms of the history of the region and its people in terms of who, what, and where. His knowledge of clocks was exceptional and he regularly advised auction houses throughout the country and lectured on the subject at the British Museum.

Born the only son of a gamekeeper on several northern estates, Eric proved to be a most unusual child, particularly interested in Natural History, even at the age of thirteen attempting, 'and failing' to stuff his pet canary. He was, however, destined to spend some fourteen years working in the pits of County Durham, before deciding to volunteer to assist the taxidermist at the Hancock Museum in Newcastle, now The Great North Museum. He learned the craft from the museum's retiring taxidermist, Dave Burleigh, and was later offered the full-time job of professional taxidermist. His knowledge of the region's wildlife was an invaluable basis for this work, varying from his first job of stuffing a hedgehog to the most memorable one of stuffing a tiger, which had escaped from Belfast Zoo, during the time of the Troubles. The streets of Belfast had never been so quiet until the tiger was found, having had a heart attack in the middle of a pond in a park. Eric leapt at the chance to take it on and it is now preserved in Sunderland Museum.

In later years, Eric was involved with CITES, the certification of ivory, which led to visits to Auction Houses all round the country – a wonderful opportunity to collect more clocks.

Having spent his professional life earning his living from wildlife, Eric felt that it was important to give something back and concentrate on the conservation of living creatures.

Both Eric and Lyn were especially interested in the Derwent Valley, near their home, and have been

involved in helping to preserve the woodland and wildlife of the area. Their sixteen acres of woodland have created a haven for wild flowers, wild animals and indigenous trees, home to dozens of species of the area. Bats, insects, owls and bird boxes thrive and Eric has also built several ponds. He had a weakness for stone, usually sizeable lumps of it, and having acquired numerous old stone gateposts from local farm auctions, built a stone henge. This took a serious amount of effort, many of the gateposts, some weighing up to 15 cwt, and more, being carefully moved and levered into position, with the help of rollers and crowbars, were dug in to form his stone circle. His experience of mine-working was obviously very useful.

His interests spanned a wide variety of subjects, notably Natural History, Architectural History, Clocks and Regional Furniture. Having heard of a North Eastern court cupboard at an auction in Exeter, he drove all the way to collect it, drove home through stormy weather, and arrived back at 2.00 am in the morning. Not daunted and faced with the problem of unloading the piece from his roof-rack single handed, he built a pile of pallets to the same height and pushed it off.

Eric was a fascinating character with an infectious grin and a well-developed sense of humour. His stories, drive and sheer determination endeared him to many people and the celebration of his life brought folk from many different backgrounds together. 'A life fulfilled' was so appropriate – Eric was a legend, one of those people one feels privileged to have known and whom one meets once in a lifetime. He will be greatly missed by his many friends and especially by Lyn, his wife.

John and Rosy Gall