

A Widow's Tale: One Year On

The rooms are bright, comfortable and bursting with memorabilia; all of it obviously belonging to the man of the house. Three walls of the dining room are taken up by display cases full of model Ferrari racing cars; the office is crammed with model aeroplanes, a huge music collection and other display cases, one filled with a large number of Hard Rock Café tie pins. A framed print of Selhurst Park hangs in prime position in the sitting room and a fireman's helmet and two medals sit on the sideboard. It feels as though the house owner has popped out to buy some milk for our tea and will be back shortly.

If this was an episode of *Through The Keyhole*, the panel would never guess the owner's identity, but, from the clues which scatter the house, they would deduce that the owner was: a retired Chief Fire Officer of Bedfordshire, with 32 years' service in the Fire Brigade; a Freeman of the City of London (awarded for his charity fundraising); a huge Crystal Palace fan; a Formula One enthusiast; a husband; a father of four and grandfather to six.

"Everything in this house is Ian's," says Lynn, as I get my bearings. "I haven't changed anything." Lynn Edwards is Ian's wife...or rather his widow. Ian died nearly a year ago, aged 65, and Lynn is finding life without her husband difficult. "Ian was larger than life and full of fun; he believed life was for living. I actually still can't believe he's not here. Every day I get up and think how did that happen? One day he was here, and then he wasn't."

The Diagnosis

Ian was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis (literally 'scarring of the lungs') at the beginning of May 2013 and on 28th July 2013 the consultant explained that the condition was terminal and gave Ian five years to live. But Ian died on 30th September 2014, just two months later. "We [the family] were totally unprepared," explains Lynn, as she curls her legs up under her on the settee, in Ian's 'spot'.



Ian Edwards as Chief Fire Officer of Bedfordshire Fire Service

"Had they told us he had a few months to live, we would have wrapped him up in cotton wool and he would have absolutely hated that – he was never going to be good at being ill. He said to Luke [their youngest son] that he didn't want to have five years if it meant his

health deteriorating so much that he was going to be in a wheelchair with machines helping him to breath.”

True to his character, Ian went against the consultant’s advice and flew with Lynn to their timeshare in Florida for two weeks. “It was actually a disaster as he needed oxygen on the flight, but he knew it was going to be his last chance to go.” Two weeks before he died, ‘the boys’ [sons and sons-in-law] had taken him to the Goodwood Revival and he’d also seen the new James Hunt/Niki Lauda film *Rush*. The boys had been racking up the experiences since Ian’s first diagnosis and they had gone up to Wembley to see his beloved Crystal Palace get promoted to the Premier League and had been to the British Grand Prix.

Each trip had been a logistical nightmare because of the oxygen bottles Ian had to carry with him, but Ian was determined, says Lynn. “He was blessed in a way because he had an amazing two months doing all the things he’d wanted to do.”

During this time, Ian was obviously facing up to the reality of his death and he wanted to talk about the future with Lynn – to the time when he wouldn’t be around anymore. But Lynn admits she would quickly change the subject and never wanted to even contemplate losing Ian. “I would always say, ‘Don’t be so silly; we’re going to fight it and you’ll get better.’ Of course, that wasn’t going to happen, but it was just not a conversation I wanted to have.”

York Hospital

A few days before Ian actually died he and Lynn were staying with their daughter in York, celebrating their youngest grandchild’s birthday. But the family day ended in absolute shock as within a few hours of playing in the garden with the grandchildren, Ian was in intensive care in York Hospital. His lungs were so full of infection that the next morning the consultant delivered the bombshell that they were going to turn off Ian’s life-support machine and let nature take its course.

“I remember Debbie [their youngest daughter] saying that she would need to get time off from work – we were assuming the dying process would take a while,” explains Lynn. “But when we went back into Ian, after they had removed all the tubes, there was a machine on the wall which started at ‘100’ and ticked down every second. Debbie said to me, ‘I hope that’s not the time Dad has left’... but it was.

“I think Ian was aware of us all being with him and he had put his arm around my shoulder when we first re-entered the room. I was sitting there talking to him and Luke held his arm in place. It was that quick. He was gone,” says Lynn, in tears.

Before she left her husband, she had the presence of mind to remove his gold chain and put it around her neck – she hasn’t removed it once – and, while in shock, she was handed a copy of *What To Do Next*. “It was just bizarre. You go in with a husband and you come out with a booklet! It was actually a very useful book, but at that point I was numb and hadn’t slept, eaten or been to the toilet in over 24 hours. It’s like your whole body shuts down so you can focus on one thing only; you’re like a robot.”



What To Do Next

Lynn felt the need to get home as soon as possible and Luke drove her home that evening. But they sat in the car for over an hour before they had the courage to go in: “It was so strange to think that he wasn’t with us,” Lynn explains.

Through her grief and helplessness, she remembers the odd snapshot of life in the ‘blur’ before the funeral: the phone ringing at 10.45pm as she walked into the house that first night (it was her family doctor asking if she was alright); her sister, Sue, arriving from Spain (“a godsend”); people visiting the house bringing food (“everyone brings food!”).

“I didn’t want to shut myself off from people so it was an open house, but I was definitely on auto-pilot and it was Sue and Luke who told me when to eat, drink and sleep,” says Lynn. It was also them, in conjunction with Bill Scott at Shires Funeral Directors, who dealt with Ian’s funeral.

“I had no idea what to do about the funeral, and I certainly didn’t want to go to an office and have a funeral director be behind a mahogany desk and have us perched on chairs trying to organise Ian’s funeral.” One of Luke’s friends recommended Bill and it was Luke who made initial contact. After that Bill came to the house and, according to Lynn, “organised everything”.

She knew Ian’s wishes with regards to several aspects of the funeral, as they had talked about dying in the past – just as part of normal conversations, rather than when he was ill. “He had once seen an untreated wooden coffin which had been covered in pictures and writing, which he liked the idea of and he wanted the boys to carry him into the church. He also wanted to keep his wedding ring on and be buried (I suppose being a fire fighter he didn’t want anything to do with fire) and he specifically said he wanted his funeral to be at least a week after his death, just to be sure he was 100% dead,” laughs Lynn.



As Ian wanted – a colourful coffin decorated by family and friends



The place of burial was unspecified by Ian and it was only when Lynn, Sue and Luke walked along the footpath to their very local church – St Owen, Bromham – that she decided this was the ideal place. “It’s such a beautiful spot and I wanted somewhere I could walk to.” Not being church goers, Lynn was worried about approaching the vicar, Rev. Linda Bond, but she visited the house and said Ian could be buried there as long as the service included a prayer and a reading. Linda co-conducted the service with Rev. Barbara Johnson, the Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service Chaplain.

Lynn was aware of the involvement of the Fire Brigade, but let Bill Scott finalise the arrangements. In the end, the funeral involved three fire appliances, a 14-man guard of honour with 2 flag-bearers – it wasn’t a full Brigade funeral as Ian was retired, and Lynn was actually glad of this as the eventual funeral was very personal and family-led.

While others handled the funeral arrangements, Lynn did visit the funeral home several times to view Ian. This was one of her first major hurdles, she explains: “The first time I visited Ian I was with good friends and I was scared to see him. I asked them to go in before me to just make sure Ian looked like Ian, but as soon as I saw him he looked peaceful and calm and all better. He looked like he should have looked. It did me so much good to see him without the grey skin [caused by lack of oxygen in the blood], the hospital gown and the hospital tubes and I could just sit and chat with him in a quiet environment where I wasn’t in the way of hospital staff doing their jobs.

“I don’t know why the children didn’t want to see him, because I could have sat in there all day with him. I found it really helpful and even now I wish I’d gone on the morning of the funeral.”

Lynn last saw Ian the afternoon before the funeral because his coffin needed to be sealed before family arrived the next morning to decorate his coffin. Lynn and her family had provided Bill with items which they wanted placed with Ian, including teddy bears, a bottle of Jack Daniels, a tea cup and photographs, and the coffin was covered with Crystal Palace ribbons, stickers, handwriting and pictures. There was only one floral tribute from his children and, at Bill’s suggestion, on top of Ian’s coffin lay his first issue wooden fire helmet, which he wore all through his career (he painted it to match his position), and his two medals (a long-service medal and his Freedom of the City of London medal).

The Funeral

“I was just praying that it wouldn’t rain - I hated the thought of us standing in the graveyard under an umbrella,” says Lynn of her pre-funeral nerves. “People were just telling me what to do that morning. At one point I said that I didn’t want to go, but of course I didn’t have a choice. When Ian arrived [in the hearse] at the house I just felt sick and my stomach was churning – I just wanted it all to be over. But he sat outside while family and friends finished decorating his coffin. I hadn’t actually seen it before, but our son-in-law took photographs which I’ve since looked at.”





Ian's coffin ready to make the journey to St Owen Church

The coffin was a colourful affair, as were the clothes people wore. “Ian wouldn't have wanted everyone dressed in black so we asked people to wear colour, although we realised that some would prefer to dress more formally,” explains Lynn. Their sons wore their Crystal Palace shirts and the sons-in-law wore Formula One shirts, so the funeral was even more personal to Ian.

There was one moment of humour in an otherwise surreal day which Lynn remembers with a laugh. “The fire engine was at the front of the procession as we left the house, then the hearse, then myself and the children in the first car. As we pull out, our neighbour for some reason pulled out of her drive and joined in the line, right in front of the second car containing the two eldest grandchildren and the sons/daughters-in-law. We couldn't believe it; looking back it was funny.”

As with the run-up to the funeral, Lynn had hazy memories of the event, although she recalls a few vivid moments: Bill taking the boys outside at the house to give them instructions on how to carry the coffin (all returned without a clue as their minds had been elsewhere); seeing a sea of orange shirts as she entered the church (Luke's football team mates' shirts); thinking the coffin might fall to the ground when one son-in-law's leg buckled because he wasn't expecting the weight of the coffin.





Ian's Guard of Honour

Lynn was happy the rain stayed away, although it was freezing cold when they went out to the graveside. Bill's team carried the coffin outside and during the committal Lynn particularly remembers the clattering noise as Sam [their eldest daughter] threw Percy Pig sweets onto the coffin after it had been lowered into the ground (Ian and Sam shared a love for them). "It felt very final at that point," says Lynn. "But it was a lovely service and it did Ian proud. His sister said he would have loved his funeral – it was just perfect." Lynn is also extremely happy that Ian was buried and not cremated (going against the societal norm). "I never felt like we were being rushed – there was no limit on the time you could speak – and the service was just more personal."

After the church, Bill had organised 'refreshments' in the Village Hall ("we couldn't call it a 'wake'," says Lynn) and she managed to talk "for a reasonable amount of time" with as many people as she could before she just felt the need to go home. "Thankfully, Bill had put out little cards on the church pews for everyone to sign – that was the only way I knew who had been there as it was just a sea of faces: I never realised so many people were there."

Life As A Widow

Nothing could prepare Lynn for her feelings the next morning. "The day after the funeral was the worst day by far. I got up and thought: This is now IT, this is what my life will be like – without him." Lynn doesn't know why, but, before her family left, they decided to walk to the church. "It was a horrid, overcast day and we were just not prepared to see the mound of earth over Ian – it made us all cry (and we later took 10 buckets of dirt off). Then everyone left to go back home and I just lay on the settee all day in my dressing gown and I ate an entire family-size Dime bar."





Lynn Edwards – “I haven’t even really come to terms with losing Ian yet...”

“I spent a lot of that day thinking about how I could go and join Ian; I honestly felt there was no point to life anymore, and the thought that I could possibly be alone for another 30 years was too much to bear. But then I thought of my family...”

Lynn met Ian when she was 15 years old (she is now nearly 63), so, she says, she has lost the person who knew her best. “I no longer have him here to talk to – I miss his voice, his touch... it feels as though my future has gone. I would still wake in the first few weeks after the funeral and think where’s he gone? I would come downstairs to see if he was making a cup of tea (as he used to do if he couldn’t sleep) and then I’d suddenly realise.”

Other circumstances have made widowed life particularly hard for Lynn this past year. When Ian died, the coroner ordered an autopsy (lung sample) because there was the suspicion of asbestosis. While Ian’s body was released for burial, it was over nine months later when a letter suddenly arrived from the coroner telling her his findings were ‘consistent with asbestosis’. At the end of the letter was the instruction to finally register Ian’s death.

After the report, people were “clamouring” at Lynn to pursue a compensation claim – lots of firefighters Ian’s age are now dying of lung disease. But she is adamantly against this action: “Ian told me that if he’d known one day he would be diagnosed with a fatal lung complaint because of a lack of breathing apparatus when he first joined the Brigade in the ‘60s, he would still have done his time as a fire fighter. He wouldn’t have hesitated. He absolutely loved his job; it was all he wanted to do. And that’s my reason for not trying to get compensation – I don’t want to put a price on his life.”

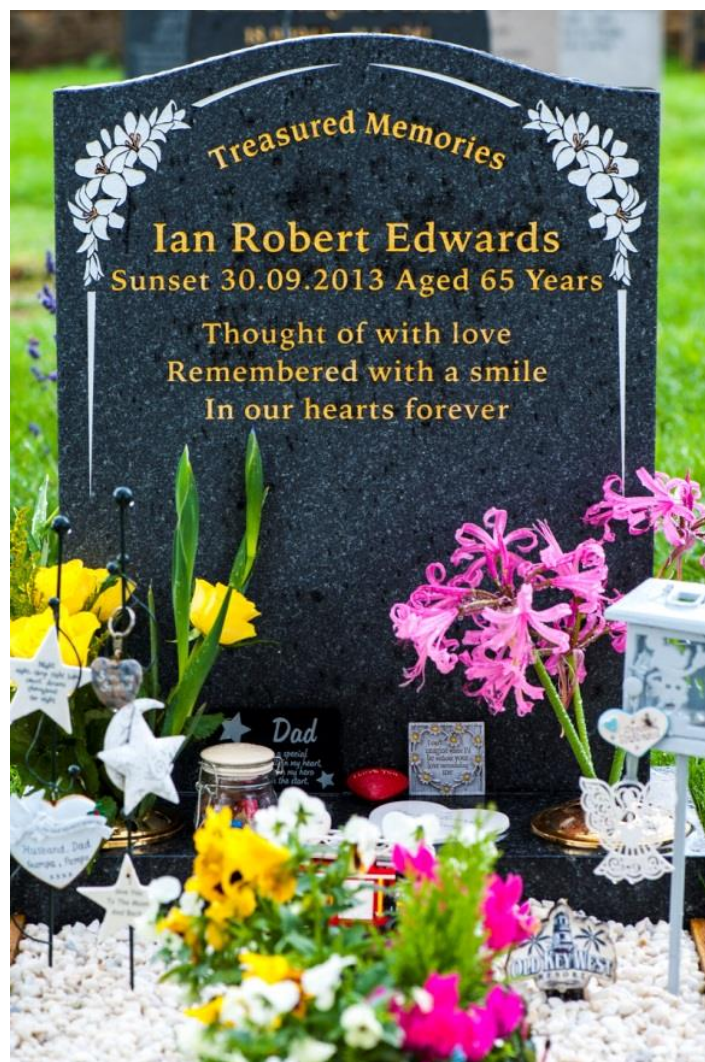
Lynn readily admits that, as she is financially secure, she has no need for compensation either. She has been able to stay in the family home of 24 years, and has not had to sell off any possessions. However, Ian dealt with the finances and one of the hardest parts of bereavement for Lynn has been learning to do everything for herself. “I let the paperwork mount up before my sister and I finally tackled the pile. I knew I had to deal with things but all the direct debits were password protected on Ian’s computer and I didn’t want to face



dealing with pensions and such like; notifying the tax department of Ian's death meant filling in a 39-page document, for goodness' sake – how some people would deal with this, I have no idea."

Ian's grave became the focus for Lynn in her grief and she admits she became completely, and "ridiculously", obsessed with visiting his grave during the first few months. "I had to go and see Ian every day, even when it was raining or I had been out for the day and it was dark. He did so much for us all, I felt it was the only way of repaying him, by tending his grave and going to see him." It was only after Luke told her he was concerned about her behaviour that she stopped her daily vigil.

The grave has since become a source of great comfort for the whole family – especially for the youngest grandchildren who did not attend the funeral. They believe 'Gumpa', as Ian was known, is up on a cloud and when the headstone was finally erected after six months, the plot felt complete. Care is lavished on the decoration and each item on the grave has significance for each member of the family, for example: a pink pig paperweight (like Percy Pig), a LEGO fire engine and ceramic moons and stars, which represent 'Gumpa Moon' and 'Georgia Star' [depicting the eldest granddaughter's childhood connection with her grandpa]. At Christmas, the family took up solar-powered Christmas tree lights and a little tree to celebrate with Ian and today Lynn has to change the batteries in the stars which light the grave: "We never want him to be alone in the dark," she says.



Ian's grave has become a source of comfort for his family



Outbursts of tearful emotion are regular, according to Lynn, especially when the family is gathered together and this first year has been difficult for everyone. “Because we are a big and close family, there have been so many birthdays and holidays which have not been the same this year – the first time Ian hasn’t been there.” Lynn has sold the timeshare in Florida and the boys, season-ticket holders for 16 years at Crystal Palace, have not felt strong enough to go to a football match since their dad died.

One of the hardest days of the year was Christmas Day, when Lynn spent the whole day with Ian and the family felt particularly bereft. Another awful moment was when they came across the newly erected headstone: “The stone masons had said they would phone the day before it went up so we would be prepared, but I never got a call,” says Lynn. “I went up with my daughter and son-in-law one day and the headstone was there. I actually thought I’d got the wrong plot. Little things like that can be so upsetting when you’re grieving.”

I ask Lynn how she feels her grief has changed over time and whether they will mark the upcoming year since their bereavement. “We haven’t made any plans for the anniversary,” she replies. “We may do something for the four little grandchildren who didn’t come to the funeral. The weekend after the funeral we let them write messages to ‘Gumpa’ which we attached to balloons and released by his grave - they think Ian lives on a lovely cloud up there. Maybe we will do that, but no one wants to talk about it really. To be honest, it’s just another day, no different from the other 364 days – Ian’s not here and that’s it. Do you particularly want to mark that day?”

As for her grief, that is still raw and her status as a widow is hard to accept. “I still have lots of days when I feel on my own, and I haven’t been out socially, but I’m quite independent and I don’t want to be the person that everyone feels they have to include. Even though I feel like a bit of a spare part sometimes, my bolthole is in Spain where my sister, Sue, (who is single) lives – I go for two weeks at a time, even though after a week I’m itching to get home and change Ian’s flowers.”

Lynn has only recently sorted out her pension and an overpayment of Ian’s taxes (due to bureaucracy) and she still hates having to tick the ‘Widow’ box on forms as she automatically goes for the ‘Married’ box, but she says over time she has learned to cope on her own. She has also developed a ‘nothing else really matters’ attitude to life. She explains: “The worst thing that could have happened to me has happened and if something awful happens to me then I’m not bothered as I have comfort in thinking that Ian is there waiting for me.” While contemplating her situation, Lynn is also only too aware that life is short and she urges others to enjoy life as, she says, from bitter experience, no one knows what’s around the corner.

And as for Ian’s things, Lynn is in no hurry to get rid of anything, although she thinks she will be soon ready to sort through and give certain items to their children. But as for re-

Lynn’s advice to new widows:

- Don’t buy anything new to wear for the funeral – wear something that your husband would have known and liked.
- Find a focus for several days a week to channel your energies [Lynn trained for five months, with friends, to complete the London to Brighton cycle ride for the British Heart Foundation].
- If possible, leave your house every day. Even if you don’t need to go out, try to force yourself.
- Gracefully accept any help that is offered.
- Keep talking about the person you’ve lost.
- Don’t get forced into doing things you don’t want to get involved with – for example, bereavement groups. You are vulnerable and it’s easy to get pushed into things.



decorating, she knows she's not ready for that step: "A year isn't a long time. I haven't even really come to terms with losing Ian yet, let alone change things about the house." It seems Ian's stamp will remain as strong as ever for many years to come.

