Albert the countryman

CLIVE FEWINS

You could hardly expect to meet a truer 'countryman' than Albert. And yet he was born in a city — in Holloway, north London, to be precise — eighty years ago.

He came to a neighbouring village as an evacuee at the age of nine in 1939. His billet — which turned out to be his home for the next eleven years — was with a farming family, and he immediately found himself assisting in all manner of ways on their land.

By the age of fourteen he had left school, and as the Second World War was still raging he immediately became a key member of their team.

By twenty, after a whirlwind courtship, he was married to Dorothy ('Doll'), a distant member of the family he was living with.

The lines on Albert's face denote a lifetime spent outdoors. And although he takes a cocktail of pills every morning for a variety of complaints it has, essentially, been a healthy life. He regrets very little. Neither does Doll.

What makes Albert 'different' — apart from his tendency to leave his front false teeth at home — is the ingenuous quality he possesses. It sounds a little patronising to say it is an endearing quality, but it is. It is a quality that is often the mark of the true countryman. It can't be acquired. It is a trait often envied by many who would like to think themselves countrymen, but are not.

Ingenuous means straight, trusting, having no 'side', no false pretensions or unnecessary airs and graces, and even at times possessing a certain degree of naivety — no bad thing. It also means possessing a straightforward, if at times a tad parochial, attitude towards work. That is Albert to a tee.

He also possesses another true quality of the genuine countryman: he is always busy.

And the other quality — and perhaps the most vitally important of all — is that a countryman, however busy he is, will always manage to pass the time of day with you.

All this gives the true countryman a rather unusual — 'elongated' is perhaps the word — attitude towards time.

When I jumped out of bed at seven — fully an hour early — one dark and bitter Saturday morning in January this year with the words "Albert's coming, he'll be here with the logs by nine" my wife's response was predictable:

"Come back to bed: Albert's never early: you know he has no sense of time."

This happy breed: Albert Rayner.

He eventually turned up at 3pm. But he had been sawing away at the gigantic trunk of chestnut that formed the basis of our log load out in the frost since 8am that morning.

Cold and hardship mean little to Albert. His surname is Rayner, but we and most of his long-standing customers have always called him 'Albert Log'.

He is used to a life of constant hard physical labour: hard work is, well, something you do every day. If life has always been tough like this, then you know no other way.

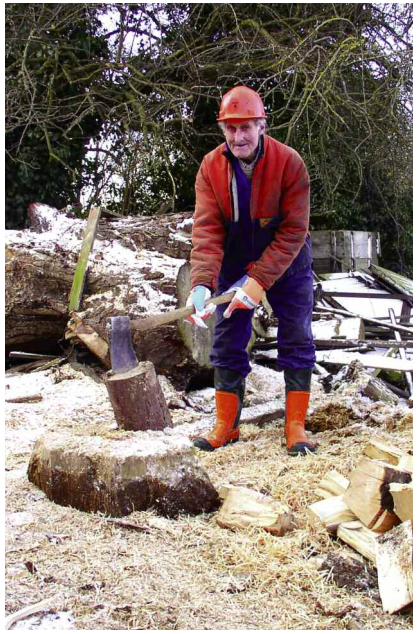
Of course a true countryman has to have a large garden (or preferably a smallholding) and a vehicle that is at least twenty years of age and always going wrong.

The size of Albert's garden denotes a cross between a garden and a smallholding. Or at least it was. Albert's vegetable-growing days are long past. He spends far too much of his time working, helping people and, together with Doll, providing all manner of support to their two daughters and son, all of whom live locally, and who have produced four grandchildren for them to enjoy.

It is many moons since Albert attempted to get into three of the four sheds in his garden. However he does claim to know the basic contents of all of them, even if his annual New Year's Resolution to 'sort them out' is always deferred by the end of January.

"If anyone wants anything I think I have got — from small pieces of hardwood for turning, to old flooring, fence posts, stakes and even metal fittings — they are welcome to have it," he says.

There is not single log in Albert's garden nowadays because there is no room for them. Albert's ancient tractor, mechanical log-splitter and battered log-chipper have taken precedence. Apart from these key pieces of equipment, the sheds, and the piles of 'useful objects' there is just room to park his battered pickup.



Albert hard at work in the woodyard.

This is worth a tale in its own right. It is only the second vehicle I have known Albert to possess in the twenty years we have been acquainted, and he has been the owner for just eighteen months. It is twenty-two years old and replaced a much younger pickup that he sold for spares. However, that doesn't stop it from always going wrong.

One dark, snowbound afternoon in early January the new pickup had broken down yet again and Albert was later than ever with the logs. My wife and I were beginning to wonder what had happened — not only because we were almost devoid of fuel, but because when we phoned Albert there was no reply.

We were on the point of getting really anxious, as the coalman had temporarily already given up all hope of battling through to our village with a load of solid fuel for our multi-fuel stove, when Albert finally appeared.

Despite a leaking fuel tank that defied all known methods of cure, and having to retrieve logs from a frozen field and split them by hand (something had also gone wrong with the mechanical splitter that day), Albert had triumphed.

He had managed to defy the elements and traversed the icy four-mile (6.5 km) road across the fen between our two villages to deliver a half-load of logs (price £35) that kept us warm for the next week and a half.

It was now 4.45pm and pitch black. Albert had set out at 3.30pm but had been waylaid helping a stuck lady motorist whose vehicle had slid into a ditch while trying to negotiate an icy bend.

He hadn't (of course) thought to use her mobile phone (Albert usually forgets to carry his around) to ring and explain the delay.

Despite constant pressure from Doll and his children to retire, or at least part-retire, Albert won't.

"There's just too much to do," he says. "What with the summer hedge trimming and tree surgery, not to mention my busiest time splitting and delivering logs in winter. I can't let my customers down. I'll retire when I get a job."

Albert did indeed 'have a job' when he was younger. He was a farmhand near Burford for four years. That was when he and Doll lived in a tied cottage, as they did when they moved nearer to Oxford and brought up their family.

But for the past thirty-one years he has been a free agent, a one-man business specialising in cutting up cord wood — trunks that won't plank and branches that are no use for fine timber — which comes in huge quantities on large lorries to one of the two woodyards he has to rent until he finally makes a gargantuan effort to clear his garden.

Never rich, never really poor, not really interested in money or the softer lifestyle it usually brings, always willing to help out, and always working, apart from the odd foray to a local gig. That's Albert. Singing, as well as jazz, has always been a favourite relaxation.

It's a lifestyle he has always enjoyed — but that he never dreamed of during his childhood in London.

After the obligatory fifteen-minute chat after the logs have been unloaded every time he visits our cottage, my thoughts are always the same: they don't come like Albert any more. ■