



REQUIEM FOR JOANNA

In late 2005, two men headed for London in a hired white van with the uncomplicated task of bringing a piano to Stroud. This is the account of how that mission was never completed and it sketches-in lightly some of the background factors which, at the outset, doomed the expedition to failure.

The unsuccessful journey was to change utterly the piano's life. If there had been high notes in its London days, many more had been middling, ordinary piano days like those of its provincial cousins, whose ivories were more often dusted than tickled and dampened at intervals by the tears of disenchanted children whose fingers refused to do what they were told.

It was never much to look at, upright and respectable enough, but there was little to suggest that it was intended for the Rodborough home of a former Archway pupil who was a supermodel at the Storm agency, featured in film and on television and whose uncle was moving to New Zealand but wanted to sell the piano to his niece for £200.



Much less, was there anything in its appearance to suggest that one day it might be played by Mick Jagger's brother or that, round its unassuming presence, the stunning duo of Emily Barker and Lukas Drinkwater would fall in love, or one night,

that it would be played, with both hands, by the monumental Tankus the Henge.



But, to set the scene, as many readers were not yet eighteen in 2005 and those that were, and lived in Stroud, rarely talk about the event that took place in early July at the stroke of midnight where Walkley and Rodborough hills meet. Nor is it kind to quiz them on the subject. Wounds may have healed but the knowledge that cataclysm can overwhelm in an instant the sunniest of days, still infects their nightly rest.



To be honest, it wasn't the fire itself that traumatised folk. Thankfully, the family and Jasper were professionally made safe. Lotte had to be person-handled through an upstairs window by vigorous firepeople. (To this day, Miles is alert for that look, a dreamy, pensive, thrumming anticipation, which occasionally lights her eyes and he immediately gathers the household matches.) No, not the fire but the five months the pub was closed. Five months!

Some folk took to driving to Bear Hill or to Brimscombe Corner just to avoid the dread reminder. None was more relieved when the pub reopened in November than the two men in the rented white van, who, conscious of precious lost time, had been making as many visits to the place as their domestic relationships would tolerate. This is essential to bear in mind when, within just minutes of the successful completion of their mission from London, the driver noticed the Albert was open. Conversation was unnecessary. As soon as the van came to a stop the passenger had his door open and his course set.

It may have been something that was said, a question perhaps, or something that just struck both men as anticlimactic about taking the piano downhill the next two hundred yards to its scheduled destination. It may have been the beer and conviviality. It may have been that Miles mentioned the pub's piano had incinerated in the conflagration. Whatever the trigger, it

gradually dawned on all those involved that they were standing in the obvious, the proper, the most appropriate home for the London joanna.

The piano had arrived in time to feature in the annual gathering of The Prince Albert Carol Consort. For this prestigious event, the landlords commissioned a thorough inspection and overhaul of the instrument. Not that the two men felt much remorse about depriving the uncle of his £200 but, when it was discovered that the piano had not only become very lowly strung but it had a persistent tendency for its G string to snap, they felt no guilt whatsoever.

Doug Barnes, the blind tuner from Spillmans, worked on its innards, as did Crimea Butler-Downton in turn and for the better part of seventeen years the piano has seen active service, tickled by generations of playful children, tested by hardened musicians, liberally moistened by beer and seriously sniffed round its pedals by dozens of dogs.

Now, shunted from the Albert's bar into the courtyard, it's noiselessly nearing its final bar, awaiting its final movement. Has it had a good life? Are there still some faint good vibrations quietly quivering in its metal frame? Can it still feel Meg's fingers crafting a seasonal symphony, still sense the humans gathered round, the ever distancing laughter, the silent cheers?



Few pianos have a CV to match it but another will take its place, more deliberately this time, and it too can be guaranteed a long and lively life in that extraordinary public house, The Prince Albert of Rodborough.

Farewell tribute from award-winning singer, songwriter EMILY BARKER

I have so many standout musical memories of nights spent at The Prince Albert but my favourite was a night with duo Jacob & Drinkwater. They played a blinder of a set and at some point after the crowd went home, Lukas Drinkwater, Tobias Ben Jacob and myself picked up the instruments and gathered around the pub piano.



We gravitated to Neil Young songs – mostly from the Harvest record – all singing along in harmony with piano, double bass and acoustic guitar.

Miles and Lotte sang along too, drinks in hand, tears and laughter and the dogs weaving about us. A spark was ignited between two in the party that night (hh mmm, clears throat) and a wedding a few years later on the banks of the Blackwood River in Bridgetown, Western Australia (my hometown).

Thank you old pub piano – Emily.