

It was love at first sight. At seven years I had found the great love of my life. He was magnificent, as tall as me, he had a very proud bearing and his black curls shone like gleaming silk. His name was Hector, a black curly haired retriever.

Dad saved his life because as he was a boisterous dog and was now chasing sheep among other doggy sins, he was about to be taken to the vets to be put to sleep. Dad said that it was a bloody disgrace to destroy a good dog like that when all he needed was a bit of training.

On the first day after came to us my younger sister, Lilian decided to take the dog for a walk. She was only five years old and that episode ended in tears and bandages. Of course when dad came home he read the riot act and forbade any of us to attempt to do that again until the dog was properly trained.

School summer holidays over the years were a real joy. A whole crowd of us would be off to the local woods taking with us, in our case, sandwiches and cake and bottles of Mum's home made lemonade and Hector. He loved it. As soon as we reached the river he plunged in, swimming around catching and bringing back sticks and just swimming around for the sheer joy of being in the water. He was a retriever and it showed.

We girls, paddled about the edge of the river while the boys lost themselves in the tree tops, calling out 'dares' to each other.

Lunch time. We all gathered together under a large tree by the river's edge.

I called Hector out of the water and we all avoided him until he shook the water from his thick coat. We all settled down on the grass and opened our packed lunches which Hector expected to share. Eyes appealing and mouth drooling. Mum always included wedges of her home made ginger cake which Hector loved and as I wasn't too keen on gingery food , he had my share too.

After lunch, we sat around chatting and the boys boasting about their exploits.

Hector flopped down beside me and enjoyed a little snooze. The rest of the afternoon was more of the same. We girls looked for the celandine and other waterside plants we had heard about in our botany classes. Some fished for minnows and darnies with a jam jar with a string handle. Darnies so called because they looked like wriggling brown darning needles but were in fact 'elvers'

Hector our true guardian kept close to us at all times. He just loved snuffling around in the undergrowth.

Nearing teatime, we all trooped home through the wood and across the right of way six foot wide path across the farmers fields and the one mile walk from there, not forgetting to spit into the hollow at the top of the ancient mile stone and making a wish while we circled the stone three times with one leg.. Needless to say Hector just lifted his leg and sprayed it with his own scent. Who said anything about health and safety? It was tradition and we were free healthy children.

Hector was my very best friend and it irked me a bit when Lilian treated Hector as her own on occasions. In the garden Dad had built a low bench where he used to sit and enjoy a pipe and his garden. I used to sit on this seat with Hector sitting at the end and with my arm round his neck I would talk to him and he seemed to understand, giving a little humph in his throat now and again.

Hector travelled many miles running 'to heel' beside Dad's bicycle. If Dad was anywhere near, that is where you could always find our dog, anticipating his every move. They had a telepathic understanding where words were unnecessary.

His mouth was so gentle that he could carry a fresh egg in his mouth without breaking it. He was always rewarded when the egg was broken into his feeding bowl.

One of his guardian jobs, which he gave himself, was to guard the local butcher's shop against other predator dogs. He allowed people to enter and leave but no dogs. When Mum apologised for our Hector's behaviour, the butcher just laughed and said " don't you worry, Mrs. Lockyer, he earns his bones by keeping the other dogs from stealing the rabbits etc.

In those days, butchers used to hang dead rabbits in their skins and sometimes chickens and ducks on hooks outside the windows but a greedy dog could jump up if not watched.

Hector's reward was a big marrow bone which he carried home very protectively

So the years passed, so few of them, until one evening I answered a knock on the front door. Nobody other than the postman or strangers ever came to the front door so I was very surprised to see Dad there asking me to get my eldest brother, Will. I never questioned him because I was only about 10 or eleven years old and Dad was Dad.

Within 20 minutes we were to learn that our beautiful, lively, super intelligent dog had been killed by one of the few cars on roads in those days. Mother, Lilian and me were taken into the garden where Dad had dug a grave. Hector lay in his hearse, the wheelbarrow that had brought him home. His body was unmarked, but his back had been broken. His black curls still shone like silk as we patted him goodbye.

Dad had lined his grave with the cleanest sweetest straw then covered him with his gardening jacket. He asked us then as we bowed our heads, if we thought he looked comfortable. We nodded yes because we couldn't say anything at that time. He then told us to go indoors. He didn't want us to see him covering our dog with the soil. We went indoors and straight upstairs to our bedroom and wept. We pulled ourselves together and joined the grown ups for our supper. It was a very sad supper time.

I grieved for Hector for years and I still often think of him and the joy he brought into our lives.