

A man who went fast but too soon

It's likely everyone who knew Richard Williams, and that'll be a lot of people, will remember the first time they met him. The giant smile – underwritten by every part of him - the open stance proffering an outstretched hand, the warmth in that big voice...they made an occasion not easily forgotten.

I met Richard not long after he came to New Plymouth to take over as manager of Radio Taranaki. Before I got much past the entrance to the Brougham St building, I was hauled aside by another Taranaki legend, Laurie Denton, better known as "Eccles" to hordes of sports people. Eccles muttered that the man I was about to meet was a good one. "He's a good one, Jim," he repeated, to be sure I got it.

He was right, and it seems ridiculous Richard has died suddenly at age 64. Peter Beck said more or less that in his eulogy: "You know, we shouldn't be here," the Dean of Taranaki Cathedral told the gathering of a couple of hundred people in St Joseph's Cathedral. "This shouldn't have happened. Richard's sudden death is too soon."

So, who was this man, this archetypical English person, who came here, prospered, went back to England in 2009, then returned in 2014 to become chief executive of the Taranaki Chamber of Commerce?

He was born in Croydon, south of London, but with deep family roots in Anglesey, North Wales, his daughter Bryony told the funeral gathering. His paternal grandfather was a vicar, and Richard's earliest memories were of family gatherings at the vicarage. Granddad loved keeping bees (a bit surprising since his wife was allergic to bee stings) but after he died it was discovered there were few bees...and many hives filled with beer bottles.

When he was young, Richard's family lived in Chester on the Welsh border. He was a choir boy, but also a biker, getting his motorbike licence at 17 on a borrowed (and gutless) 50cc machine. To his mother's mortification, he then headed home to a new 250cc Honda. There were annual pilgrimages to the TT races on the Isle of Man, and regular bike tours of Europe.

Such days were numbered and family life beckoned after Richard - on his way home through Dover from the Munich beer festival - was introduced to Miranda by a mutual friend. They married 18 months later. Evidence of motorcycling days survived, however: a pair of shiny red biker boots sat on Richard's coffin in the church. Bryony explained they were rescued from the rubbish by her brother Nick, and re-gifted to their Dad on his birthday.

Richard simply loved an adventure, she told us - zipline, roller coasters, skiing, jetboats, most sports. "He never turned down the chance to be a big kid again. If he could have got a zipline from the power station chimney to the top of Paritutu, he would have made it happen."

Chamber of Commerce chair Sophie Braggins told us he was a great advocate and had strong relationships with local councils, northern and central hub leaders, and significant key partners such as the TSB Bank. "His career in the media gave him an air of confidence and knowledge and when combined with his natural effortless approach with people, made him a force to be reckoned with."

Former mayor Peter Tennent outlined a wide community involvement. Richard was 10 years a trustee on the Taranaki Rescue Helicopter Trust, the chair and founding trustee of the Help a Taranaki Child Trust, a trustee for the Dame Malvina Foundation, and was similarly involved with the YMCA, and the Events Venues Taranaki Trust, working hard to ensure New Plymouth became the venue for the ITU sprint triathlon, which was staged here last

weekend. He was a passionate Rotarian, serving as chair of Pukekura Breakfast on a couple of occasions.

“I recall in my time as mayor the number of community events and organisations where Richard had a part to play. If he wasn't front and centre, he'd be advocating for and supporting good things to happen, and be able to happen. Always positive. Always polite, and with dignity.”

There was one other significant thing about Richard Williams' funeral – the venue. He was Anglican and the cathedral was Catholic, an accommodation between churches that at the time Richard was born would never have been contemplated. He'd have loved that.