Patrick Sandeman - a bright light extinguished

23 Sep 2012 by Jancis Robinson

Many of us in the UK heard vaguely in the national news of a most unusual collision of skydivers, one in his 50s and one in his 20s, on Saturday at Sibson near Peterborough. The tragedy, and this word is not an overstatement, is that the man who died was the much-loved wine merchant Patrick Sandeman of Lea & Sandeman. The diver in his 20s is still in a serious condition in hospital, but the uncorroborated rumour is that Patrick suffered a cardiac arrest during the dive and was therefore unable to avoid the collision, which took place not far above ground level.

I'm sure I am not alone in having found Patrick one of the most appealing and entertaining characters in the wine trade. A total ornament to the British wine trade, he was a member of the Sandeman family of port and sherry fame, managing to be devastatingly handsome but not intimidatingly so. Charming but not oleaginous. Well informed but engaging. Great company, in a word - and extremely talented in his ability to hand-pick great wines from, particularly, Italy. He occupied a unique place in the world of wine.

I had long admired the range and ethos of the small group of upmarket independent wine shops Lea & Sandeman that he and Charles Lea had, over many years, managed to establish and I had always enjoyed his company, but the only time I spent a sustained time in his company was a couple of years ago when I flew to join him for the research necessary for A Tuscan search for finesse . He was great company throughout our few days dashing up and down the Tuscan coast and inland to Montalcino – and I don't feel personally implicated in the speeding tickets he apparently garnered during our few days tearing around western Tuscany together.

I was dimly aware that he was keen on derring do, but he certainly didn't ram it down my neck. He was a thoroughly benign, modernising member of the Vintners' Company, and I have to say that this is the very first death in the UK wine trade that has come as a complete and affronting shock to me, and doubtless many, many others.

Our very deepest condolences to his equally delightful wife Katy and their children. I remember that he signed up enthusiastically for our Wine Relief dinner at Clarke's in early 2009 and generously shared a great magnum of 1963 Sandeman port – probably the wine of the night.

A very bright light has been extinguished.