



KEY MAN

Many Caravan Club members have extraordinary jobs and pastimes. **John Thynne** starts off an occasional series with a trip to the House of Commons to meet Senior Doorkeeper Alan Dickens

“LOCK THE doors!” The House of Commons Speaker utters the command and Senior Doorkeeper Alan Dickens, wearing his uniform of white bow tie, black long-tailed coat and gold badge, seals the MPs into the lobbies while the votes are cast.

The former Royal Marine Band Serviceman from Colchester is a big fan of the traditions involved in one of the more unusual jobs enjoyed by a member of The Caravan Club. “I love my role,” he says. “Every day is different. I’ve always been interested in politics and to be where it all happens is very exciting for me.”

Alan started working at the Palace of Westminster in 1993 following a couple of lucky circumstances. “A mate of mine who I was in the Band Service with took my dad, my son and I on a tour. He said, ‘You want to apply for a job up here, you’d love it.’ Not long after that, an advert appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* for a doorkeeper in the House of Commons. I applied and out of 535 applicants, three were taken on. I was one of them – I was quite pleased!” he says.

Doorkeepers at the Commons – of which there are 36 – play an important role in the day-to-day running of the House. “Our job is to help Members of Parliament in the Chamber,” says 56-year-old Alan. “We deliver messages, *Hansards* [the official record of proceedings in both Houses], enquiries from *Hansard*, green cards [notes from members of the public who have come to see their MP]. Plus, if there is a ‘division’ [requiring a vote], it’s us who control it all.”

He says it’s vital to build a good relationship with all the MPs. “You approach every one differently. Some you will call by their first name, some you won’t. Some are knights, who you call ‘Sir’. We tell them right at the start that we are here to help them and that if they need something, we’re the ones they come to,” he says.

While he describes the holidays as “generous”, Alan says the job can sometimes involve long hours. MPs have been known to debate into the early hours of the morning and he once worked for three days solidly (with six-hour breaks for sleep).

However, this is clearly a man with a passion for his employment. When the

Chambers aren’t sitting he conducts tours of the buildings on a volunteer basis, and he shares much of his knowledge with us during our walk through the warren of corridors.

The silver-gilt waist badge he is wearing, for example, belongs to the Crown Jewels, and older solid-gold versions date back to 1751. Underneath each badge hangs the winged figure of Mercury, the mythical messenger of the gods, a fitting representation of the doorkeeper’s role.

While his love of music ultimately led him to his job at the Commons, Alan also has a musical connection with The Caravan Club. For the past five years he has played the cornet in the Club Concert Band, a role that has seen him travel all over the country. The regular section is already a major commitment but last year he was presented with an added, unusual challenge for the National Rally at Prestwold Hall.

“We put a marching band together in five working days. I have to take my hat off to the people in it because we really shouted at them!” says drum major Alan, who explains how difficult it is to learn to play and march at the same time.

The display was a huge success but members may have to wait a while for a repeat performance. “We did get asked to do it again for this year but we said no – it was a lot of hard work. Plus there’s the rehearsals for the Concert Band – we’re doing a full evening largely on our own [at this year’s National Rally at Weston Park in Shropshire] in one of the marquees. We’re doing *A Night at the Proms*,” he says.



As well as attending the National, Alan and his wife enjoy foreign touring. “I’ve just bought an Ace Jubilee Statesman – a fixed-bed twin-axle caravan. We go all over the place, not just with The Caravan Club Band,” he says. “Over the last five or six years we’ve toured most of France, last year we went to Interlachen in Switzerland and we’re going to Lake Garda this summer. My daughter Sarah comes and we took my son Gavin, his partner and their little’un to La Rochelle in September, and had a cracking fortnight there.”

At this point in the conversation, Alan checks his watch and hurries us to the Public Gallery in the Commons where he has kindly reserved us seats for Prime Minister’s Questions.

“Sorry, but I won’t be able to see you afterwards,” he says, “I’ll be working.” As he sets off down yet another ornate corridor, it’s clear to me he’s not so much working as indulging a particularly fascinating passion. ■

Above: Alan leads The Caravan Club marching band at last year’s National Rally

Main image and below: Looking immaculate in his working uniform outside the Houses of Parliament

We would love to hear from other Club members who have an unusual profession or hobby – please drop us an email at magazine@caravanclub.co.uk