by Cheryl Stonehouse

In a village on the edge of commuter land, far enough away from London to be called home to ordinary people with ordinary incomes, a portly, almost elderly man called David Gilmour is a regular on the school run. This week, after dropping his son off at school, David went home to his spread on the Surrey-Sussex border and perhaps looked at his desk diary to see what he had on that day.

"Collect Mojo lifetime achievement award for contribution to rock music," is possibly what someone had scrawled on the page for June 5, 2006. Or it might just have said, "Night out with Phil - Phil being neighbour Phil Manzanera, erstwhile Roxy Music guitarist and the man chosen to present Pink Floyd's legendary guitarist with one of the coolest awards in the business."

"He's a regular kind of bloke when he's here and he's here a lot – he's very much a family man, he doesn't disappear for months on end doing rock star stuff," says one of his less high-profile neighbours. "If one of his children has been to a party, he stops and has a cuppa when he calls to collect them."

"He's not a chatty man by any means but there's nothing about him that suggests wall-to-wall platinum albums or a life spent in limbo. The only thing we do differently if we know he's likely to be popping round is to make sure the Dark Side Of The Moon CD isn't lying around."

This, it has to be said, is a strange corner of South-east England. The locals have, over the years, had plenty of practice at feigning insouciance when the likes of Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, Jools Watters and artist and conservationist David Shepherd have wandered into their everyday lives. When Chris Evans and Billie Piper were still together and looking for a life outside the goldfish bowl, this was the spot they chose. In David Gilmour's case, however, there were very few who ever had to make a conscious effort not to gawp when he first moved into the area 15 years ago. Though his publicity describes him as the voice of Pink Floyd, until recently, his face remained a mystery to all but the most ardent fans. As a great admirer of Cambridge's intellectual middle class, Father Doug was a doctor of physics at Cambridge and his brain drain of the Seventies and went to America – and mother Sybil a film editor.

He was sent to Cambridge's ferociously academic private school The Perse and, though he has since develop his own in his own songs, his studies, his parents were alarmed by the amount of time he spent playing rock and roll.

By the time he was 14, most of his spare time was spent playing in bands with friends around the city.

By the time he was 20 – having told his mother not to worry it would all turn out OK – he was a formidable professional guitarist playing with a band called Jokers Wild who were getting a great deal of regular work and had attracted a devoted following.

"But that was only in Cambridge and there was no sign that the band, or any of the guys in it, were going anywhere," remembers Hugh Fielder who booked 29-year-old Gilmour to stand in for his own band's guitarist in 1966 – they had a hit gig at the Cambridge Girls' High School, and

'I'm not doing this for recognition or decoration'

Val of the spectacular The Wall show that summer.

"The second half of the show began with David climbing up the soft wall that had been constructed on stage during the first half, and standing there playing the most spellbinding guitar solo I've ever heard. It would have been a tour de force if he'd been standing on the ground."

"Yet during the interval when I went backstage, he was sitting there eating chips, hanging with a Rubik's Cube. There was not a hint of nervousness about him."

"He never really considered his musicality as a human being is a capacity for total calm. He just doesn't do 'freak out'."

"If he was on a boat that was going down, he would simply weigh up the situation and say, 'the wind's blowing in that direction so I suggest we all get on this life raft on this side of the boat'."

"It is ironic that one of the most influential members of the psyche of the mid-Sixties music movement of the mid-Sixties should have been someone who wasn't tempted in the slightest to drop acid, to tune in, turn on and drop out."

Like the rest of the band's founding members, Gilmour is the offspring of Cambridge's intellectual middle class. Father Doug was a doctor of physics at the University, and his brain drain of the Seventies and went to America – and mother Sybil a film editor.

'The Wall'

Though Gilmour, being a professional player, would have to be paid the whole fee, they didn't want to miss the chance of being screamed at by a half full of teenage girls.

"What struck me about him was that he didn't seem to have any great ambition. He wasn't one of those who went around talking about the day they would make it big."

He was a superb guitarist but he didn't give you the impression that he had plans to go anywhere much beyond Cambridge.

"It was an accidental rock star, really, called in when Syd Barrett was starting to be really strange and seemed likely to mess up the chances of the others could see were just about to come their way."

Pink Floyd always recruited their friends – even the album cover designer was someone they had known since their school days – and David was the person who had taught Syd to play the guitar.

"So they asked David to come in to play lead guitar and more or less cover for Syd's increasingly peculiar behaviour on stage. It was only a few months later that Syd was gone and David was simply there."

The reluctant rock star, however, has proved again and again in the past 36 years to be stabilising ingredient that has saved Pink Floyd from being just another in a string of eccentric geniuses – he eventually bought his own island in the middle of the river and the others could see were just about to come their way.

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I'm not a rock god - just an ordinary bloke

PINK FLOYD'S DAVID GILMOUR, THIS WEEK REWARDED FOR HIS MUSICAL GENIUS, IS THAT RARE THING - A RELUCTANT HERO WHO'D RATHER GIVE HIS MILLIONS AWAY THAN LEAD A LIFE OF ROCK 'N' ROLL EXCESS

ON THE rare occasions when he tours - never too far from home because he doesn't want to be away from his wife and children - he rehearses in the local ex-servicemen's club, even though the swanky rehearsal rooms of Soho are only a 40-minute train ride away.

How did he get through it all without for a moment losing the plot? His own verdict is that he is just a lazy kind of guy, always has been - though some would just call it sanity.

"I don't think any of us ever became fully fledged rock and roll people," he said recently. We were sort of part-time at it, doing a little three-week tour and then taking a month off and then doing another three-week tour.

"I tend towards not really bothering sometimes but, then again, I think sometimes it's nice not to be too hung up on stuff. It's not unreasonable to sit around and want to enjoy yourself quite a bit. Have a relaxed existence."

musical potential. Roger Waters had the ideas but I am convinced that David was the one who knew how to turn them into reality," says Laird-Clowes.

From Floyd's earliest, idealistic hippy days, there was an ethos of sharing the good fortune the immediate band members had almost stumbled across, and Gilmour was an enthusiastic supporter of policies that meant many members of the road crew were considered full members of the band and got a fair share of the rewards.

"They are the only band I've ever heard of who insisted on contracts that contained detailed provisions about how the road crew would be dealt with. There was almost nothing about what the band expected for themselves but there was always a clause insuring the crew should get a full, sit-down meal served to them after the show, for instance," says Hugh Flanders.

That ethos, say friends, remains part of Gilmour's day-to-day life. His charity gigs are necessarily public events - several with old pal Paul McCartney in support of animal welfare and the Floyd reunion everyone thought could never happen at Live 8 last year.

He remains more than comfortably wealthy but quietly supports an enormous number of charities. He has told friends he firmly believes it will do his eight children no good at all if they were to become multi-millionaires when he dies; they will not be left penniless but they can expect his will to share a good deal of his personal fortune between various charities.

'It's nice to be able to sit back and relax a bit!'