It’s November 1990, and Canon Alan Hughes MBE and his wife Susan are attending a reception at Buckingham Palace.

Susan was to later write in her diary: “The Queen and Prince Philip appeared in the vast doorway of Buckingham Palace ballroom. She was beaming away. Her hair is dark brown, like a much younger woman and she walked towards us in quite a hearty, outdoor sort of way.

“Prince Philip asked me about my Parachute Regiment brooch. When I explained that I had parachuted, he replied: ‘You must be mad, my sons have done it’. “The Queen approached and Alan said how much he had enjoyed watching the Queen Mother’s birthday parade on television. The Queen said that unfortunately she had been in Canada at the time.  “Alan said she should have videoed it. She (the Queen) laughed and said, ‘do you know, the Secretary of State was there and he lent me his video when I came home.’

That memorable occasion was one of many when Alan, 76, either had the honour of meeting the late Queen Elizabeth II - or being in close proximity to her.

The former Vicar of Berwick’s relationship with Britain’s longest reigning monarch who spent an astonishing seven decades as both the nation’s figurehead and a towering presence on the global stage, began as a child in his native Yorkshire as he stood by the roadside waving a flag as her Limousine sped by on “some visit or other.”

It was to continue as a young Coldstreamer on guard duty at Windsor Castle as the Queen walked past with her beloved Corgis, wishing him a good afternoon; at a royal review of his regiment; the presentation of colours to the Coldstream Guards; several garden parties at Buckingham Palace; official visits to Berwick and Alnwick; and at an Army Chaplain’s depot garden party in her honour at Bagshot Park, Surrey.

Then there was the Braemar Highland Games in 2014 which Alan and Susan attended with Her Majesty, and the Sunday service at Crathie Kirk at Balmoral, where the Queen made her now infamous intervention in the last Scottish Independence Referendum amid yes vote fears, by publicly telling a wellwisher: “Well, I hope people will think very carefully about the future.”

The Canon and former Sheriff of Berwick has also had the privilege of meeting King Charles III when he was still the Prince of Wales, when he presented him with his MBE, as well as the late Queen Mother.

As the current chaplain to the High Sheriff of Northumberland, Colonel James Royds, he and Susan were present at King Charles III’s Royal Proclamation at Morpeth Town Hall on September 11. It was, Alan says, a touching moment that held a personal resonance beyond his own lifetime’s devotion to the late Queen, as he explains.

“My watercolourist wife, Susan, comes from a long line of artists. Her great great grandfather, Henry Tanworth Wells, who was president of the Royal Academy, painted a picture for the RA showing the young Queen Victoria receiving the news of her accession to the throne. It was later presented to her and is in the Royal Collection.

“It was poignant that Susan should be present at the Royal Proclamation in an age of television and cameras when her forbear used only a brush and paint to record the event.”

As fate would have it, Alan and Susan had been holidaying in Scotland and were near Balmoral mid-afternoon on September 8, when the Queen died. They had driven from Braemar to Ballater – just seven miles from Balmoral - as news of her ill health broke.

Alan says: “The sombre resignation and grief of folk we knew in those villages was palpable, unsurprising given their close association with Her Majesty throughout her life.”

He said they had reflected on this as like millions of others not just across the UK but the Commonwealth and the world, they had watched the coverage of the Queen’s coffin being driven from Balmoral to Edinburgh “along the road which we had so recently travelled and slowly on through Ballater where the Queen loved to relax and shop, buying televisions, tea, toys and tuck for her grandchildren.”

Alan feels honoured to have met and served the Queen. But like many he is finding it difficult to adapt to the transition from her reign to that of King Charles III, given the Queen’s longevity and the important part she played in all our lives.

Asked what it was about the Queen that endeared her to so many and Alan says: “When she enters a room it lights up. She has a sort of aura and a presence. I think there is something spiritual about that.

“Even in a huge crowd, where there are thousands of people around, there is that incredible focus, drawing all the energy from all the people roundabout.   “I say ‘is’ as like many I’m still finding it hard to believe that a woman who played such a central part in all our lives is no longer with us.”

Alan helped secure a visit from the Queen to Berwick in 2000 when she granted the freedom of the Border town to his former regiment, the Coldstream Guards, and granted them the colours which now hang in the parish church. He says he could only be amazed by her energy and good humour.  “I have always marvelled at her stamina. As a vicar I would wilt after shaking hands with a couple of hundred parishioners at a church door.   “Her stamina has always staggered me. Her ability to keep going, to keep smiling, right up to that confident, encouraging smile to our new Prime Minister, Liz Truss, at Balmoral two days before her death, when she knew that everything was drawing to a close, was astounding.”

The Queen had a long association with Northumberland. She made numerous public and private visits to the county, beginning with a whistle stop tour of the North East in 1954 two years after her Coronation, which saw her and Prince Philip take in Whitley Bay, Tynemouth, Wallsend, Newcastle, Gateshead, Jarrow, South Shields and Sunderland all in one day – a time she was to recall with wry amusement in a speech made in 2002 on another tour of the region as part of her Golden Jubilee celebrations.

Alan believes she loved the county. “She visited Holy Island and stayed quite regularly in the county or when passing through. She was aware of the connection with her namesake, Elizabeth I, who built the walls around Berwick, and with the great link with Christianity with Holy Island and the Celtic saints.

“A lot of military and political public servants over the centuries have had their bases in Northumberland, and I believe the Queen was very aware of the history of the area and had an affinity with that.  “It’s all interwoven with her dynastic history as well as her own life history; the royal connections with Northumberland.”  Alan says that empathy has passed to the new King Charles. “Absolutely. I would put his love of Northumberland, involvement with and connections to, as high as his mother’s. “There is an historic bond that I don’t believe will change with the new king.”

Article in The Northumbrian Magazine by Jane Hall