

WELCOME

For those who don't know me, I'm Paul Sweeney, Owen's son.

Congratulations on finding somewhere to park!

(adlib) I'd like to take a moment to pay tribute to the amazing support I've had not just recently, but throughout Dad's illness from my wonderful wife Zoë.

Welcome, all of you, to this service in memory of Owen Sweeney.

Hopefully you've all got sight of an order of service, I'll now hand you over to Father Tom McElhone, parish priest of this wonderful church.

EULOGY

As soon as Owen became aware of the seriousness of his illness, he began getting his affairs in order, designing the order of service and, Dad being Dad, even a Eulogy for me to read! So I'll start with his words but then have some of my own. There's so much that could be said, but I've tried to keep it all to about 10-15 minutes.

Rev. Audrey's reading from Paul to the Philippians had always been a favourite of Dad's, he says. He found it short and inspiring and it reminds us too that others are needed to help achieve our tasks and aims.

The mention of "I know how to be poor" certainly did not apply to Dad's family upbringing in Blairgowrie, Perthshire, by loving parents Patrick and Mary, and siblings - Martin, Ann, Dan and Roy - and notably by a remarkable mother. They were blessed.

However, he says, it could apply to his early years in London when shared flats and bed-sits in Finsbury Park, Archway & Hounslow, and Tooting Bec & Streatham south of the river - maximum £3+10/- per week rent - and, extravagantly, some time in Bromley at £3+15/- p.w.

Dad also resumed his football interests playing for an Army side in Winchester as well as a civil Service team in London. (He began his football with Coupar Angus juveniles,

also a starter club for Alan Gilzean of Dundee and Spurs fame - no other name drops coming!)

Dad had by now met and got engaged to his beloved Linda and they were married in St. Joseph's Bromley in June 1969 with the additional delight in the birth of son Paul in 1970, also in Bromley.

We also enjoyed an enlarged family when Linda's brothers Barry and Keith married Audrey and Diane respectively and they have children and grandchildren too.

Dad continued working in London and had some interesting jobs including Private Secretary to a Deputy Under Secretary of State, a bit similar to "Bernard" in "Yes, Minister" , and later Head of Management Studies Centre, with a team of tutors, at a time of big management theory changes in behavioural psychology, leadership, equal opportunities etc. emanating mainly from America.

Then some of the happiest times when we were posted as a family to Cyprus for three years in 1976. It wasn't long after the 1974 war which led to the partitioning of the island with a UN peace line. Tensions remained high but what we experienced was an unchanging hospitality by local Cypriots, Greek and Turkish, as MOD employed both as locally engaged civilians as well as administered the UN local employees. The sunshine, sporting and social facilities helped too! Linda in particular loved it.

Dad returned to commuting but after a previous 10 minute walk to the office along a cliff path overlooking the Mediterranean with Tunnel Beach golf course below - and finishing work at 1300 hrs for it was too hot thereafter - London's 12-hour day took some getting used to again.

Dad's interest in football was mentioned earlier. After playing elsewhere for 18 years, he became a Gills FC season ticket holder for some 10 years and enjoyed with Paul trips to Wembley play-offs (two successful) as well as FA cup ties at Stamford Bridge and the old Highbury.

Linda meanwhile threw herself into voluntary work with the RSPB and so impressed others that she became leader of the Medway Members' Group for some seven years up to her passing. Also responsible for the sale of RSPB goods - full garage at all times - and with her members managed to top the league of sales goods in UK with over

£10,000 sold during the RSPB's centenary year. Dad recalls her whooping with delight that day.

Dad also volunteered, with bird surveys his main interest. He surveyed for RSPB's joint Farmer/Volunteer scheme; KWT's initial bird look at its new reserve at Nashenden; BTO's Wetland Bird Survey and Garden Birdwatch scheme as well as the recent BTO Breeding and Winter Atlas of all UK and Ireland species. Many a laugh was also had at Queendown Warren's KWT Tuesday task group.

Dad's more recent work was in conservation, trying with Medway Countryside Forum to save Lodge Hill, a protected SSSI, from development. There is to be a Public Inquiry next year about its future. He hopes RSPB and others can save it.

A big part of Dad's life has been this parish of St. Thomas of Canterbury. He was "volunteered" by Father Doug Bull to be Chairman of the Parish Council and served for some seven years. It included celebrating the Parish's 50th Anniversary and Father Doug's Silver Jubilee as a Priest and his 50th birthday. Dad comments that albeit chairman, all the hard work was done by our willing band of parishioners which made them very enjoyable events.

Dad would like to thank all priests, deacons and parishioners for their spiritual guidance throughout his time here. It has been an important source of his love of life, as were early upbringing and Linda's influence. He asks for forgiveness from others for his errors.

Finally, he says, Dad would like to thank his beloved Linda and son Paul , who has been a tower of strength especially in these recent months, for all the good times. And Paul went from our local comprehensive to Imperial College where he gained a Master's degree in Electric Engineering, later became a Chartered Engineer and now has a pilot's licence. The latter is some achievement when his Dad did not like flying of any kind! With two smashing children, Marcus and Georgia, his is a happy lot too with wife Zoe and two step-daughters, Victoria and Rachel.

Dad apologises for the length of above; a typical trainer's shortcoming.

Thank you for listening.

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But I'll ask you to indulge me and listen some more as I now deliver my Eulogy :-)

As is common with young men finding their own way in the world, to my regret at times our relationship had ups and downs, but when my Mum Linda was ill and I was living in Bristol, although I did know she was ill and what it meant, he actually shielded me from much of what was going on and all the hard work he was putting in. So this and the incredibly dignified and resilient way he dealt with Mum's death won my utmost respect and strengthened our relationship for good.

Even through the ups and downs he has always been unconditionally supportive.

But for me, the support he gave me in so many ways during my unpleasant divorce was simply overwhelming, despite the hurt it caused me and him by not being able to see his grandchildren as much as he would have liked.

When he did get to spend time with them, many hours were spent viewing birds, adders, rare orchids, or finding a checklist of 20 types of butterflies, fungus or flowers so that they were allowed to have lunch!

Amongst his many talents, Dad was in my opinion a really rather good artist. We'll have some samples to see at the wake later. The back of the order of service has two herons behaviour sketches – a type often found in his birding notes. Whilst working in London he would lunch at the National Gallery to study the works or attend lectures.

Dad famously didn't want presents - he genuinely didn't! So around the time of his 70th birthday I wanted to apply for him to the Queens honours list.

As Owen was someone always self-deprecating and not wanting attention, I started to quietly sound him out on this. He soon told me that he didn't value them at all and said that within the civil service, where the mandarins at the top got them rather than those who did the actual work, the O-B-E was known as - forgive me father - Others Bloody Efforts!

So I didn't put in an application, but here's the case I would have made:

- His many years of dedicated and exclusive Civil Service. The long commutes he endured as a result. Not just to London but, as Head of the Management Studies Centre, to many courses all around the country.

In Cyprus he was responsible for the "locally engaged civilians" - the Cypriots employed by the Ministry of Defence, whose best interests he defended vigorously.

As part of this work, he had to visit the site of the crash of an American U2 spy plane into buildings at RAF Akrotiri and support and even identify the victims.

He was also tasked by the military command with finding a reason to dismiss a former EOKA paramilitary group member who was the prime suspect in bombing the base's petrol station. I later discovered that he was then advised to check under his car each morning for suspect devices. Can you imagine that with a beloved wife and 7 year old son? I still don't know how he did this or how long this lasted but it apparently ended when the many friends and supporters he had amongst the locals got the word out that Owen Sweeney was not to be touched - or else!

He often said he was concerned at taking me to Cyprus since the quality of schooling on the base wasn't the best, but those 3 years gave me the very best life education and experiences I could have wished for. Thanks Dad!

- He has been a member of the congregation here at St Thomas' for nearly 50 years - not much short of the life of the church!

- His dedication to nature conservation and birds in particular. He won a book about birds as a prize in primary school in 1951 when he was just 8, but his reception teacher remembered that even from his first day he seemed to know everything there was to know about birds.

I can't even begin to do credit to all of his work and achievements in the nature field or we'd be here for at least another hour, but amongst many others:

- the RSPB nationally and locally in Kent
- the Cyprus ornithological society
- Kent Wildlife Trust
- British Trust for Ornithology
- Kent Ornithology Society
- Medway Countryside Forum,
- Bredhurst Woodland Action Group

have all recognised how they have benefited greatly from his knowledge, experience and enthusiasm.

Georgia and I were delighted to receive on his behalf a Silver Butterfly and Marsh Volunteer Award from Marsh Christian trust at the KWT AGM last year.

He also won a Gold Award from Kent County Council, having turned over both his back and front garden entirely to nature.

He once explained how he dealt with weeds in his garden - A weed, he said, is a plant you don't want. I enjoy the different flowers and they all benefit wildlife in different ways. I've decided I want all plants, so I have no weeds!

He got great pleasure from his weekly visits to his friends in the Queendown Warren Kent Wildlife Trust "Tuesday tasks group" which included tree clearance, installing fences and inoculating and shearing sheep amongst other things!

He also coordinated annual Heron Surveys and made weekly trips for many years surveying buzzards all around Kent with his friends Rob Clements and Doug Grant. He often got access to areas of private farmland through his good-natured personality that softened even farmer's hearts.

Special mention must go though to his work fighting the Cliffe Airport, and then taking such a lead with the Lodge Hill housing estate proposal. I don't think there's any chance of Medway Council dedicating a richly deserved Sweeney Close or Owen Way!

Being a lifelong supporter of the working folk, he wasn't against the badly needed housing development, just certain that it should be environmentally sustainable, and only on greenfield sites once the plenty of other suitable sites were used up.

He wasn't one for blowing his own trumpet - or anyone else's for that matter.

Sometimes though he would come across people that he deeply respected and could only find the words "he's just a good good man".

I think that is a great and suitably low key epitaph that he would have been proud of nearly as much as we are proud of him.

Owen Sweeney.

A good good man.

Rest in peace.