

A celebration of life

Frank Edward Brown

12th February 1950 – 14th May 2017

12 noon, 30th May 2017, Mendip Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

Tribute

Frank Edward Brown was born on the 12th February 1950 in Ramsgate in Kent to Frank Leslie, always known as Les, and Gladys Irene. Les was a Petty Officer Stoker on board a submarine in the Royal Navy and was a prisoner of war in Italy during the Second World War. Les was presented with a medal for bravery for his part in the war although he didn't ever speak of his experiences. He met Gladys who was twenty years his junior, when they were playing darts and they had three boys, Frank the eldest, Robert, born eighteen months later, and Richard who arrived somewhat surprisingly when Gladys was in her forties.

Robert is going to speak on a more personal level about his relationship with his older brother after this ceremony. As they were two boys, born closely together, I'm sure their relationship would have been one of competition and companionship and I expect Robert will have some funny tales to tell.

Frank grew up on a council estate in Ramsgate, went to the local primary school, Newington Community Primary School, going on to St George's Secondary School. He had a long affair with the clarinet which he played in the school orchestra but was never going to reach the heights of Acker Bilk, whom you will hear later. Both he and Robert were taught by a man at school who inspired them, and a lot of other young people, into the joys of bird-watching and they both developed a huge knowledge and a passion for the hobby. This was an interest which he inspired other members of the family to take up as well: Richard, Anne and Catherine especially. Frank was a keen and talented artist and particularly excelled in water colour painting, something inherited from his mother and shared by his brothers who are also similarly talented. He gained a place to study architecture at the School of Architecture, Canterbury College of Art in 1968 where he remained for the long seven-year course.

Frank had an eclectic taste in music and loved classical music as well as opera and rock music: bands such as 'Hawkwind', 'Captain Beefheart', 'Moondog', who were awarded the title of 'weirdest band in the world'. He had a huge collection of LPs, a real esoteric mix and he would often take people to watch really high-brow, challenging concerts out of sheer devilment and enjoy watching their bewilderment. He did a lot of travelling in these years, often to study the architecture of the country, in Greece for example and his travels were often non-conformist, involving hitch-hiking and spontaneity.

Richard was born in 1969 so Frank was in effect a surrogate dad to him as he was growing up and of course, an inspiration and a hero. Frank often took Gladys and Richard up to London and sometimes out of sheer mischief and inspired by the stylishness of the chase in the 70s' film, 'The French Connection' Frank would be stepping on and off the tube, leaving his mum and Richard in complete confusion and frustration, much to Frank's amusement. Not everything Frank did was necessarily appropriate for the young Richard however: allowing him to watch 'Jaws' at the age of six, understandably and in Richard's words' frightened the bejesus' out of him.

Frank took his Master's degree at the University College of London and it was whilst living in a shared flat that he met Anne in 1982. They had Catherine in 1984 and were married, having moved to Newport Pagnell where Frank gained his PhD with the Open University, thus becoming Dr. Brown. Frank was heavily involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament at this time and he and Anne had a big group of friends who were involved both in the CND and in the local Labour party. Frank was Chairman of the very active Newport Pagnell Peace Group for some of this period.

Frank soon realised that he was much more interested in the intellectual and historical side of architecture, rather than being in practice, although he had spent time working on an interesting Luton Airport project in the late 1970s. He also became very aware that he was not really cut out for marriage: he didn't thrive on being contained in any way and needed to be able to suit himself and follow paths of unpredictability and spontaneity. He and Anne split in 1987 and Frank took a lecturing job at Manchester University which he began in 1989. Anne moved to Somerset in 1990 and there began the many years of travelling down to see Catherine, and often then on to Ramsgate where they would spend weeks together at his family home. By this time, Frank's dad had died and Frank, his mum and Richard who was only fifteen years older than Catherine, spent a lot of time together, including Bob and his wife Maria who also lived nearby, so they were often also a part of those trips and evenings.

Catherine remembers these holidays with great pleasure. There were big, generous outings, often of course, with an element of the educational in them, to places like Hever Castle, Canterbury Cathedral and zoos like Howlett's. There were also the more mundane experiences like messing about on the beach, bird watching, going to Pegwell Bay, going to the cemetery to see her Grandad's grave. Catherine says that they might not sound terribly exciting but she found everything with her dad to be an adventure, nothing was ever predictable, sometimes indeed, were even dangerous. He is known to have forgotten Catherine at an M1 service station on one occasion. Frank was very close to his mum: in later years he spoke on the phone to her almost every day, and going home to Ramsgate was always very important to him.

In the 1960s Frank had been diagnosed with Crohn's disease, 'nothing trivial' he said laconically, and had to have an operation. As luck would have it, this was in the same hospital and at the same time as Gladys was giving birth to Richard so she divided her time visiting both sons in different wards. Instead of spending time recuperating gently Frank took the opportunity to hitch-hike around Ireland and stayed on the remote western islands of Aran. Unfortunately, the symptoms of Crohn's flared up again in the 1990s and Frank had to have another operation in 1996.

At the university, Frank was a supervisor to a lot of foreign PhD students, far more than most lecturers had on their books. He spent many, many hours reading their work, correcting their English, working with them tirelessly with the result that they thought of him as family and often invited him to their countries. Frank visited a lot of Middle-eastern countries: Syria, Israel for example and also Brazil. He attended the Goethe Institute over a number of years deciding to learn to speak German, which remained an on-going project just like the clarinet. He had two periods of sabbatical leave, in Berkeley in California and in Japan. He contributed to books and published his own articles and was passionate about research, his specialist area being spatial morphology. He did care about his teaching of architecture but found the numbers very tiring: sometimes he could be teaching to a lecture theatre full of students whilst his lecture was being relayed into another hall, again full of eager students.

He worked very hard and was often not back at home, a flat in Sale, until after 7pm. He was never sporty himself, although he had enjoyed walking holidays, some with Richard in Scotland, and he liked watching football, cricket at Old Trafford and the Olympics on television. Frank appreciated things of quality: nice clothes, good coffee and the best red wine. He also had a snazzy Alfa Romeo car. He was gregarious, was very well liked by colleagues and students alike but always remained independent, comfortable in his own skin. He had a clever way of keeping different parts of his life separate, such that the rest of the family didn't know about any romantic interests. Frank was actually stalked by two ladies, one an ex-PhD student, who was eventually deported and the first, when Frank was in his twenties back in London.

Frank was made a senior lecturer in 2001 but sadly in that year also, he found out that he had developed Parkinson's Disease. For a long time, Frank continued as normal: teaching, doing research, driving, working very hard, but unbeknown to a lot of people he was having huge difficulty with everyday tasks such as getting himself up the three floors to his flat. He refused help with his shopping and tried very hard to maintain his independence. He eventually had to retire when he was sixty, truncating what would have continued to be a brilliant career. Frank had been hospitalised due to his declining health and he then developed glaucoma and the early signs of dementia. He made an immediate move from hospital to residential care near his mum and brother, Robert, in Ramsgate, later moving to a care home in Somerset, Field House and finally terminal nursing care at Torrwood in Wells.

Parkinson's robbed Frank of the subtleties of his expression and his quick, impatient movements, so integral to his personality, but he was always optimistic and positive, a lot of fun, showing tremendous force of spirit and retaining an enormous capacity for enjoying life. He kept his boyish, wicked sense of humour, and was always very popular with staff and residents. He could still munch his way through a huge packet of Mars bars, always a favourite of his. He continued to go to concerts and to enjoy being taken out, but he also spent a lot of fantasy time in his own world, as happy as he could be. Frank mellowed in the final years, becoming more tolerant and grateful but there was sometimes a caustic tone to his voice, 'patronise me, why don't you?', just to keep everybody on their toes. Frank wouldn't have chosen this as a manner of death but he remained dignified in illness, kept himself going, stubborn, dogged, 'an awkward bugger'.