

# A celebration of life

# Michael John Lewis

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*a personal goodbye*

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## **Eulogy for Dad, Holly & Joe Lewis**

It feels bizarre to be doing our Dad's eulogy, only last year we watched him doing the eulogy for both of his parents, and they were 97 and 99.

I'm Joe and this is Holly. We just want to thank you all for coming today to pay tribute to our dad. I can't put into words how proud I am of him, especially how he dealt with the last few years. He meant the world to us, and clearly some other people thought he wasn't half bad either.

One of things I always marvelled at was his ability to excel in pretty much anything he turned his hand to, and over his life became an accomplished scientist, musician, cricketer, fencer, husband, dad, granddad, and a great friend to many people. He took enormous happiness in those around him, but he was no dreamer. As one friend recently said to me, 'He was the world's loveliest cynic'.

We're going to tell you a bit about his life and reflect on some of the traits that we loved about him most.

Born to Beryl and Jim Lewis on January 1st 1950, he was the first baby to be delivered at Wakefield Hospital as the new half century began.

His Father was a RAF pilot, predominantly flying Lancaster Bombers during the war, and continuing his career with the RAF after the war ended. His mother was a teacher who qualified at Homerton College, here in Cambridge.

I think this combination of Airforce father, and teacher mother imprinted on him the importance of punctuality and politeness. Certainly one of the most polite people I've ever met. Even weaponising his politeness at times, thanking people into submission.

He had a younger sister, Annie, born a couple years after him. As a family they moved frequently because of the nature of the RAF postings. This meant moving schools and starting again many times over... Cornwall, Scotland, Germany...

Although there was no hometown that the family would return to, they often spent time at his Grandparents farm in Kinsley, Yorkshire.

This association was important to him and he told me he thought of himself as a Yorkshire lad, something I personally saw no evidence of, apart from the occasional Geoffrey Boycott impersonation

Because of this frequent moving, by the time he was 9 it was decided that he and his sister would go to boarding school, so Mike was enrolled at Pocklington School in Yorkshire. Broadly speaking he loved school, (apart from the occasional caning for smoking behind the bike sheds). He was able to play lots of cricket, and attend school trips like skiing in the Alps and cultural trips to Italy, as well as being pushed academically. He also made a lifelong friend, Tim Sawdon, who is one of the lucky few to have known him since he was a boy.

During term breaks, Dad would travel back to Germany to visit his parents in an RAF Dakota cargo plane, something I know he took great pleasure in. Up to his final days he would still be able to identify a plane just by its engine noise as it passed our house on route to Marshalls Airfield. (I have my suspicions that this is in fact the reason why they moved to Seymour Street in the first place)

As a teenager in the 60s, the influence of pop culture and music were starting to creep into his life. He got a guitar at 15, after being inspired by musicians like Bob Dylan, Burt Jansch and John Renbourn. This would set his musical bearings for years to come.

He did well in school and passed his A-Levels at 16. One of the sad pleasures since he died has been looking at old photographs and reading through some of his old school reports that he'd saved, and in a letter from one of his old Pocklington teachers.... it read: 'By reading Science Michael would be in the happy position of serving himself and also his country'.....  
So, duty bound and following the advice, he went on to study Natural Sciences at Christ College Cambridge - starting in 1968 at 18.

Here he met some great friends and adjusted to University life as a young man.

He never told me much about his university days, so I can only assume he had an excellent time.

He stayed on in Cambridge after graduating, getting his first professional Job at the University Genetics Department, and shortly after moved into a house on Gwydir Street.

He also got really into the Cambridge music scene around this time, over the years joined many bands as a bassist, Good Biz, Thunderbox, Out of the Blue, just to name a few....

Then, on an auspicious night out in 1977 at the Maypole pub in Cambridge, he met a young nurse called Caroline Bennett. They fell in love and a year later they were married.

My mum recently told Holly and me about one of their first dates, where he took her out in his MG Midget convertible for a country pub lunch, at the Three Horse Shoes in Madingley in a bid to impress her... Nice, dad! I think it worked.

So, after leaving the genetics department he joined the Laboratory of Molecular Biology for the Medical Research Council in 1982. I'm sure one of the few people to get a job at the LMB through a conversation over the garden fence. This is where he would spend the rest of his working life....

... So, fast forward a mere 32 years, all of which Dad spent working at the LMB. Fortunately for Joe and I, Hugh is here to talk about Dad's work, because neither of us really understood it, no matter how simply Dad tried to explain it to us. We'll leave this chapter to Hugh.

Joe and I arrived in the mid-eighties marking the start of a new era in Dad's life: Mike the family man.

As distracting as we must have been, Dad managed to maintain a whole host of hobbies and interests. He was able to include the family in many of his activities outside the home.

In particular I remember:

- Dad taking Joe and I into the lab at weekends to use the 'Internet' whilst he set up agar plates long before anyone had such access at home

- Mum doing the teas for cricket matches whilst we played by the side of the field and ski trips with the whole family (plus some high performance ones just with Joe in later years).

After too many early starts driving me to random sports halls for fencing competitions, he eventually decided to join in, which led to us sharing many happy, sweaty evenings at Netherhall sports hall, and a committed career in fencing, both taking part and administering.

Quite sensibly, Dad's gigs were generally a kid-free zone, but his enthusiasm for music is something that Joe and I have certainly inherited. If he was disappointed that we didn't follow in his musical footsteps - beyond some ill-advised teenage dabbling - he never let on. We hope his musical talent and ability might still live on in Alfie and Ada.

Dad loved to travel: we have many happy memories of camping holidays with Annie, Phil, Beccy and Jonny, ski trips with the Bennett uncles, and after Joe and I left home some great adventures with mum to Cuba and Nepal. I'm sure he liked the holidays themselves, but to reiterate the point about his enthusiasm for aircraft - he also knew the make and model of every plane we ever took.

The last years of his life were coloured by his illness. But, to focus on that would be too sad, so instead I'd like to tell you a few things that I'm grateful for.

I'm grateful:

- For the good years since his diagnosis. And they have been good. Over the last couple of weeks we have been marvelling together at how recently he was still playing music, going for walks, enjoying exotic foods and generally making the most of things. Thank you to all those friends and family who visited dad when he had to spend more time at home.
- For Dad never taking it personally, always just watching the disease and his body's response to it in a curious, scientific mind-set. Some people find comfort in faith, I think Dad found his in knowledge and understanding.
- For Dad outliving his parents, Beryl & Jim, there is some small mercy in that.
- For Ada and Alfie. I'm not saying that Joe and I planned the timing of our families to encourage Dad to hold on for longer, but I'm so grateful that he got to meet and enjoy them. I think we can credit them both for a few of these last months.
- For Mum. Your strength, care and love sustained Dad. And I know it sustains me. Your marriage was and is a total inspiration, a true partnership with all the work and reward that entails.
- Finally, I'm sure that we're all grateful to have had him as a friend, colleague, band member, team mate, uncle, cousin, brother-in-law, brother, husband and dad. He was a great man.

Anyone who's ever travelled with Dad will know that he valued punctuality as well as politeness. More than once we arrived at the airport for a holiday before the check-in desks were even open. He was early for many departures and, as it turns out, his last is no exception.

We'll miss you, Dad.

Sir Hugh Pelham, with whom Mike worked is going to speak about Mike as a scientist.

### **Memories of Mike in science – Hugh Pelham**

Mike was my colleague and friend, and I couldn't have asked for a better one.

We first met back in 1982. I was a young group leader just starting out at the LMB – the MRC laboratory of Molecular Biology – and had been given permission to find someone to join me. In those days we didn't actually advertise for students or scientists, we just waited for them to turn up, or asked around. Mike was suggested to me by Michael Ashburner, who was employing him on a grant that would shortly end. So, he came to see me at the LMB and in due course accepted a one-year probationary position. Towards the end of that year, Sydney Brenner (then the LMB Director) asked me how I was getting on with Mike. I was very enthusiastic, so Sydney simply said "OK, we'll make him permanent, but don't change your mind in a year or two!". I didn't, and Mike stayed with me for 32 years. He was the first person to join my group and the second last to leave it; virtually our entire scientific careers were thus entwined.

For years we worked very closely together. Initially we shared a laboratory bay, later I had a small office and his desk was just outside the door. When he had a good result, he would show it to me, and when I had a crazy idea, I would try it out on him first. From the start, he was easy to get on with. We had both been at Christ's college, though at different times, and we had some friends in common. Over the years, we spent countless hours over coffee in the canteen discussing not just science, but also politics, our children, or the world in general. During all that time, we never had a significant argument. Indeed, I don't recall Mike ever getting angry with anyone in the group – he did occasionally admit in private that one or two people drove him nuts, but he was always courteous, helpful and patient even with them. His calm and friendly manner set the tone of the lab, and made it a happy place. He was completely unselfish and always willing to help. He mastered every scientific technique we tried over the years, and became the father figure who taught everyone else and helped them over their problems, becoming a good friend of many.

Mike also made very significant scientific discoveries himself – indeed, some of the most notable achievements of the group were his. After a few years, he chose to do a belated PhD. He had the advantage of experience, but even by LMB standards the thesis he produced was spectacular. In typical fashion, Mike was self-deprecating, and I remember him nervously preparing for the oral examination, which he feared would be intimidating. In fact, his examiners told me afterwards that they were equally intimidated by the amount he had achieved – tucked in the back of his thesis were the published papers that resulted from it, and they included three first-author papers in the top journals *Cell* and *Nature*. Over the years, his name was on many important papers, and they stand in lasting testament to his very substantial contributions to human knowledge.

Though he didn't plan it that way, Mike often said how glad he was that he had not followed the conventional path from PhD to postdoc to university lectureship, with the subsequent teaching obligations and struggle for funding. Instead, he was able to do what he really enjoyed, research in one of the best institutions in the world. He was very much part of LMB, taking on several extra responsibilities. Perhaps most enjoyably, he joined and later organised the LMB cricket team, which enjoyed considerable success. And of course, he played bass guitar in the "Yeastie Boys" band at the Christmas party.

Science is full of excitements and disappointments, and Mike and I shared many of them over the years. But fundamentally I enjoyed it, and I think he did too.

He was a wonderful man.