

TRIBUTE TO JOHN KEITH PROWSE

8 / 2 / 1934 - 18/3/2018

John Keith Prowse was born on 8 February 1934, here in Weymouth, to parents Thomas, a local coal delivery man and Ellen. John was the middle child of five – Brian and Sheila being older and Julie and Monica, younger. John was a quiet boy who enjoyed a very happy childhood. He left Weymouth Grammar School at the age of 16 and became an apprentice at the Palm House in Melcombe Regis and then soon afterwards, he joined the local council Parks Department which was to be the beginning of a 40 year career.

As well as starting work, John also started going for coffees at Weymouth's famous Rossi's on the Esplanade. He really enjoyed the coffee, but that wasn't the main reason he was there ... it was because of a waitress called Maria, who had recently come to Weymouth from Cassino (Italy) the same year, 1949, aged 19 . John would either wait for hours in the café for Maria to finish her shift or he would help her wash up at the end of the night. One day, Maria saw John and his sister Monica sitting on the beach, so she joined them and started chatting to John and love began to blossom. This was the time of National Service and so for two years in the early 50s, John was in the Dorset Regiment, based in Dorchester. He was given the opportunity to be posted abroad but he chose to remain in Dorchester, so that he didn't lose Maria!

A highlight for John during his time in the Dorsets, was being chosen to be one of the soldiers to march in the Coronation parade of 1953 . He wrote an account of this experience which was published in The Echo in 2003 and I'd like to read to you just a short extract from it. John recalled,

“My main memories of the big day were trying to keep my uniform up to standard whilst living under canvas in a London park, the incessant rain on the day and one beaming lady, of ample proportions, sitting in an open carriage and getting as wet as we were . She was, I was told, Queen Salote of Tonga”.

He was obviously very proud to have taken part in that historic day .

John and Maria eventually got engaged in 1953 and then married at St Augustine's Church on Dorchester Road on 23 October (Maria's birthday), 1954. John had converted to Catholicism for Maria – an act which was, as she said, “a sign of true love”. They set up their first home in a rented flat on Holland Road but after a while, Maria's boss and owner of Rossi's, Fioravanti Figliolini, said to her “Maria, you shouldn't be renting, you need to buy a house” and he gave her the deposit the couple needed. They bought number 5 Salisbury Road in 1959 and it has been their home ever since.

John gradually worked his way up from his first job for the council as a garden boy in the Melcombe Regis Gardens nursery to become craftsman gardener. He also took an additional job in the evenings, working at the local aquarium (now the site of The Gurkha restaurant) for a few years whilst they were having work done to the house and generally turning the house into the warm and welcoming family home it is today.

Children soon arrived with Antony in 1960 and Caroline in 1962. Antony said his earliest memory of his Dad was being taken to see Weymouth football club playing at the nearby Rec and Caroline's was the Everton mints he would bring her back after the football! They both said that John wasn't a strict father – quite the opposite – he was kind and always easy going, even if they got into trouble! He also didn't mind driving Caroline all over Dorset to riding stables and numerous gymkhanas and one of the special things that he and Caroline always did every year, was to put up the Christmas decorations together.

As we all know, John was the kind of person who was friendly and he could put you at your ease very quickly. This character trait came in very handy when meeting Maria's parents for the first time as when Maria left Cassino, her father had said to her “whatever you do, don't ever come back with an Englishman!” But when they met, John immediately got on well with his new in laws, enjoying a glass of wine with Maria's Mum and picking up a bit of Italian to talk to her sisters. He really embraced the Italian way of life and he even had a favourite café in Maria's home village of Portella he would visit for coffee and pastries!

In 1968, John was appointed head groundsman at the Weymouth Athletics Centre and in 1974, he became supervisor of all sports areas. In 1980 he also took on responsibility for children's playgrounds, supervising nine workmen.

In his spare time, John liked doing The Echo crossword and he was an avid reader – he liked reading sportsmen's autobiographies, books on old Weymouth, on Italy and reference books on gardening and animals and the Encyclopaedia Britannica. But both Antony and Caroline said it was his extensive knowledge of plants and gardening that they felt he liked share with them – he was always the person to ask how to grow tomatoes! John also loved watching films from the 50s and 60s on TV and of course, sport - as long as it involved kicking a ball of some sort! John also liked to listen to music every Sunday morning and he loved his big band jazz. Him and Bryan used to go to the jazz club at Brewer's Quay every Wednesday night and latterly they were joined by their wives which Bryan said somewhat meant the end to their "lads nights out"!

In 1981, Caroline left home to marry John, to be followed by Antony who went on to meet his partner, Jenny, in 1985 . Maria said this left the house a bit too quiet but it gave her and John more of an opportunity to travel to Sicily to visit her family and go on many holidays with Sheila and Bryan. John became Parks and Open Spaces Inspector in 1988 but three years later, he formally retired from the council in 1991 aged 57. John was very highly regarded by colleagues and by those at the Municipal Offices. He continued working as a nurseryman at Lanehouse for a short period of time whilst Maria worked at Suttons Café in town, until they both decided it was time to retire for good.

In the meantime, the family had grown with the arrival of grandchildren - Liam in 1985, Tashi in 1987 and Ryan in 1988. Liam has said how understanding, generous and thoughtful his Grandad was, never getting cross, no matter what he did. One well remembered story was how Liam was told not to climb the cliff, but he still did and got stuck in the clay, causing John to climb up and rescue him. Tashi will remember John for, amongst many things, their mutual love of food – particularly pasta made by Maria . Tashi visited Italy twice with her grandparents and although Tashi and John's Italian was limited, they showed their appreciation of the fantastic food provided by eating it all ! And Ryan has mentioned how John spent three months getting up early to take him to his apprenticeship in Portesham until he had taken his driving test.

John and Maria also have four great grandchildren – Brody, Tallula, Cory and Perry. In 2014, they celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary with lunch at the Wishing Well at Upwey and then a party at home. They received a card of congratulations from the Queen.

John was diagnosed with prostate cancer and his health slowly deteriorated. He passed away on 18 March - a quiet and peaceful day with snow falling gently to the ground - aged 84. He was not in a hospital but at home, with his family around him and I think this is something for which we should all be grateful. Maria said she felt she could not have met a better man and he will always be remembered for being a helpful, peaceful, kind and caring husband, father, grandfather, great grandfather and friend.

*Written and delivered by Emma Kimber of Humanists UK at
Weymouth Crematorium, Dorset .*