



A celebration of the life of

*Peggy James*

1922 - 2018

At Harwood Park Crematorium  
Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> August 2018



Ceremony conducted by Accredited Humanist UK Celebrant

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Humanist  
*Ceremonies*

♪♪♪ *Simon and Garfunkel - Bridge Over Troubled Water*

## *A Tribute to Peggy*

Peggy James was born Peggy Gower on the 1st of June 1922 in Newport. Her father was a travelling salesman and her mother stayed home to look after the children. At the time of Peggy's birth, Newport was a vibrant industrial town with foundries, engineering works, a cattle market and shops that served much of Monmouthshire. However, as the decade wore on, local unemployment grew to 34% but despite the economic conditions, the council succeeded in re-housing over half the population during the 1920s and 1930s; it is possible that Peggy's family were amongst those rehoused.

As a child, Peggy attended the Royal Commercial Traveller's School in Pinner. Her Brother Howard attended the Merchant Taylor's boarding school. The Royal Commercial Traveller's School was a boarding school which boarded and taught children of travelling salesmen, such as Peggy's father, and admission was between the ages of 5 and 10 – staying until they were 15. It is likely that living apart from her parents in a remote and alien environment was very difficult for the young Peggy.

By the time she was in her early twenties, she trained with the British Transport Police from which she graduated in 1948. It was through her time at the Transport Police that Peggy met her future husband Aubrey James, whose job it was to police the Cardiff Docks. The pair fell in love and in time, got married. During the 1950s Cardiff was a hub of industry with coal and steel forming the majority of employment. Factory work for women was plentiful, but life was not easy. Aubrey was aware of this diversity of opportunity and so he left the police to work for one of the region's largest employers: Richard Thomas & Baldwin's which soon became British Steel.

In 1954 the couple had their first child, Stephen, and just over a year later, Stephen was joined by his brother Huw. The boys attended Milton Junior School in Newport and here Peggy took a job as a lollipop lady, making sure that the school children had safe passage across the roads; she worked in this role until the boys started at the local comprehensive, Hartridge High School. By this time, Aubrey was a well-respected employee of British Steel and so in 1965 he accepted a promotion to work in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management at the British Steel headquarters in London; for the family, this meant a significant move to England, which they eventually did, settling in Cockfosters in North London.

During their first few years in London, Peggy worked for the travel company Thomas Cook in Berkley Square Mayfair. Aubrey worked around the corner in Grosvenor place and the pair enjoyed regular lunch dates at a café in Landsdown Row followed by walks around Berkeley square. Peggy loved London with a passion: the museums, the river, the art; and so began a lifelong fascination with the city, a place she longed to revisit in later years and one which she enjoyed vicariously through her long conversations with Huw.

In 1974 Peggy and Aubrey left London to move to Old Hatfield. By now, the boys were relatively independent, following their own chosen paths. Peggy loved the town of Old Hatfield and took regular walks with their collie dog, visiting the shops or going to Hatfield House which she adored. In 1980 Aubrey was offered a new position at British Steel to take up the demanding job of managing industrial relations and overseeing the significant changes – changes which were to be the total restructure of the industry. The new post necessitated a move once again, but this time back to Port Talbot. Aubrey was trusted by unions and management alike, though the times were challenging and this must have taken its toll on Aubrey and the family. At the start of the 1980s British Steel went into a 13-week national strike which was the result of the Corporation's pressure for change and a pay dispute. By the end of 1980, British Steel had completed the closure of a number of loss-making plants and reduced its workforce from 268 and a half thousand to 130,000. It is no surprise then, that Aubrey took early retirement in 1982 and he and Peggy moved shortly thereafter to Reading.

Sadly, only four years after his retirement, Aubrey died suddenly of a heart attack, aged 59. Though Peggy was in essence an independent woman, her husband's death came as a terrible shock and she was lost without him. In many ways, Aubrey had been her rock and he had done everything for her from being the breadwinner, to being a keen homemaker and an active dad when the children were younger. Understandably, Peggy did not want to remain in Reading; she had lost the support and security of her partner and apart from the memories she shared with Aubrey of their last few years together in Reading, Peggy didn't drive and found her journey to the bus stop ever more arduous and though she enjoyed being out and about walking, she wanted more simplicity. So, she moved to Chepstow, to a perhaps rather contradictory location at the top of a hill which she would have to ascend each time she disembarked from her local bus!

No one could figure out Peggy. She was completely unique; she could be utterly charming and delightful but also unpredictable. On the several occasions in which she moved house she would tell Stephen "I am a prisoner in this house! I am stuck here!" while the actual reality was she would have been out several times that week, shopping, taking the bus, visiting garden centres and buying knickknacks for the house. She loved shopping and filled her home with plants and flowers - poppies and anemones amongst just some of the varieties she loved - as well as a host of trinkets and baubles. She enjoyed buying cards and gifts for friends and family and would often send these on a whim. Indeed, Peggy deeply loved her family and friends; she valued and revered them.

But how do we define Peggy? It is impossible! She was quirky and different and those who knew her well may have often considered that there was often little logic to her choices; she could be contrary and contradictory on the one hand while being expansive, generous and kind on the other. She loved theatre in all its forms and was thrilled by live performance and live music. As a younger woman she had seen all the greats at the top London theatres: Lawrence Olivier, Ralph Richardson and Alec Guinness. She read voraciously from a large collection of books which spanned fiction, biography and autobiography to the arts. In particular, she loved the fictional works of Vikram Seth, illustrated books on art and design, books on the world's art galleries and biographies including those of sportsmen and women, and actors. Huw gave her a lot of novels to read, though she preferred good literature to the occasional thriller. She also enjoyed books on the history of Newport and Cardiff.

She has eclectic tastes in music and enjoyed listening to almost anything; and she adored anything - anything at all - that was colourful. She was rarely seen wearing *anything but* brightly coloured clothes and she enjoyed sitting in her bright red armchair surrounded by her multitude of colourful objects: prints, paintings, books, cards, rugs, pillows and all manner of knickknacks that amused her. She was immaculate in her appearance and took care to do her hair nicely; she chose her outfits well, matching the colours and topping off the look with well-chosen jewellery. When they lived in Hatfield, she had the stairwell of the town house painted red and in later years, the walls of her flat were painted the same colour. She loved the artist Anne Laddon whose vibrant red typewriter print adorned one of her walls, as well the vivacious colour prints of Itzhak Tarkay; these artists' palettes strongly chimed with Peggy's own fervour for colour. Stephen often bought his mother items to please her and these were things that had caught his eye because they were bathed in vibrant colours which he knew would make his mum happy. Over the past few years he also brought her fresh daffodils when they were in bloom.

Peggy was fascinated by art of all mediums and was a member of the Royal Academy. Huw remembers how she loved going to the Courtauld Institute and he accompanied her on numerous occasions. She was without doubt a very cultured, if not Bohemian, woman who loved galleries and museums and through her close attention to such a variety of riches, she was able to talk about fashion, literature, art and the use of colour in design with considerable assurance.

During the late 1980s through to the 90s, Peggy would have long conversations with her friend Neil and his partner Magdalene; Neil had a bookshop in Notting Hill and a stall at Portobello Market. She loved seeing Neil and when they met they talked about art; but in later years when Peggy was unable to physically get out and about, Neil would phone Peggy and resume their expansive discussions about art and design; he also gifted her some large art books – one on modern art and in particular, one on the use of colour in design - the colour red being the predominant theme!

Huw has abiding memories of ringing his mum when he was in central London. Having a taxi drivers' knowledge of the city was useful for Huw because he would tell her which part of the city he was in, for instance: he might say "I'm walking down regent street now..." He would often spend an hour and a half describing the streets and the buildings, the statues and the cafes, and from her flat Peggy would be sat in her red chair, picturing the vivid sights described to her by her son, and Peggy would say "you're giving me your virtual tour". In her later years, Peggy wished she could just hop on a train to be there but she was not a confident traveller.

She also loved sport. It almost goes without saying that as a proud Welsh woman Peggy loved the Rugby. But she was also an avid follower of golf, cycling and the tennis and watched as much of these sports as she could from her television, often following the careers of the tennis players.

Despite the loving welcome she gave her family, especially her beloved grandchildren, Peggy was a quite hopeless cook with the exception of a neck of lamb! When the children were growing up, Aubrey did much of the cooking and from about the age of 14, Huw started to cook meals. In later years, if Peggy was to go out to eat the last thing she wanted was fuss. She didn't like posh places and felt uncomfortable if people stood on ceremony. What she

liked was a plate of egg and chips or plaice and chips with a cup of tea and a Mississippi mud pie to follow.

Stephen has asked me to read a poem which he feels exemplifies his mother, and it is called "Warning" by Jenny Joseph:

### *Warning*

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple  
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.  
And I shall spend my pension on Kahlua and summer gloves  
And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.  
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired  
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells  
And run my stick along the public railings  
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.  
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain  
And pick flowers in other people's gardens  
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat  
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go  
Or only bread and pickle for a week  
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry  
And pay our rent and not swear in the street  
And set a good example for the children.  
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practise a little now?  
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised  
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

from *Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe, 1992) © Jenny Joseph, reproduced with permission of Johnson & Alcock Ltd



Some days ago, when I met Stephen to talk about his mother, he showed me some of the things she loved, amongst them a shopping bag decorated with a multitude of colourful designs, a bright red notebook he had bought her, a card which Peggy's granddaughter Jenny had sent her, a colourful cartoon-like print by Beryl Cook and the remarkable Anne Laddon typewriter print. Even Peggy's glasses frames were red. What was it about colour that's so typified Peggy? She could be an exceptionally positive person who always looked on the bright side of things. Perhaps this brightness came from her tendency to shelter herself from the realities of world, like the news headlines; this, and a dogged determination to avoid the negative realities that impinged on everyday life.

Peggy was apt to hold the opposite view to almost everyone; it was virtually guaranteed that if you said black she would say white. In this regard, Peggy could be infuriating, but also often very funny. She was opinionated and stubborn and lived vociferously by her own convictions. At times the family would say the opposite of what they wanted Peggy to do in a bid to convince her to make choices which could only be of benefit to her. Sometimes this succeeded but essentially Peggy made up her own mind about things; she loved her independence and this gave her the opportunity to live exactly as she wished, disregarding the everyday interruptions such as house work. She didn't actually tidy the house - Peggy's idea of tidying was to move one pile of things to a different part of the room and create a new pile. In her flat she was surrounded by belongings which sat on the floor in heaps, whether these were magazines, books, CDs or unopened bags; she continuously lost things amongst these heaps, exclaiming, when she had found something, that she had discovered something new - a new treasure that she was seeing for the first time.

Peggy lost both her parents to untimely deaths. She would have been in her twenties when both mum and dad died and we can only imagine the trauma that this bereavement visited upon her throughout her life. There is little doubt that her sense of equilibrium in the world was steadied by her marriage to Aubrey; his own death being a further trauma for her to live with. She had an abiding dislike and distrust of doctors and dentists, a loathing perhaps steeped in a fear of her own mortality, and towards the end of her long life she determined to never, ever be moved to a care home and in this, she won out.

As Peggy's physical abilities declined, Stephen managed to persuade her to move to a flat at Dixon Place, Buntingford which offered assisted living. Here Peggy met Julie who worked on the staff team. Over the last couple of years, Julie visited Peggy on a regular basis and the pair enjoyed having chats and drinking coffee – Peggy's cup often topped off with a tot of Kahlua. Julie was a wonderful, understanding lady who did so much for Peggy and Peggy acknowledged this, and spoke fondly of her friend. Julie undoubtedly made Peggy's last two years a little easier in very difficult times.

Peggy spent almost six years living in the flat at Buntingford, but she wasn't always happy there – she found it difficult to get out and about and her isolation could make her grumpy, despite regular visits from Stephen and phone calls from Huw. One thing that always raised her spirits though, was the contact she had with her granddaughter Jenny. Jenny was very

loving towards her grandma – they enjoyed a close and abiding relationship and talked a great deal about art and a whole host of other things; Peggy was tremendously proud of her. When Peggy was a small child, she had been nicknamed “piglet” and this is the name that her grandson Chrissy chose to affectionately call her.

*♪♪♪ Treorchy Band of the Welsh Guards - Land of my Fathers.*

I have been asked to read a poem by Canon Henry Scott-Holland called *Death is Nothing at All*. In many ways the message of the poem is to Peggy's late husband Aubrey.

*Death is nothing at all*

Death is nothing at all  
I have only slipped away into the next room  
I am I and you are you  
Whatever we were to each other  
That we are still  
Call me by my own familiar name  
Speak to me in the easy way you always used  
Put no difference into your tone  
Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow  
Laugh as we always laughed  
At the little jokes we always enjoyed together  
Play, smile, think of me, hope for me  
Let my name be ever the household word that it always was  
Let it be spoken without effort  
Without the ghost of a shadow in it  
Life means all that it ever was  
There is absolute unbroken continuity  
What is death but a negligible accident?  
Why should I be out of mind  
Because I am out of sight?  
I am waiting for you for an interval  
Somewhere very near  
Just around the corner  
All is well.  
Nothing is past; nothing is lost  
One brief moment and all will be as it was before  
How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!



♪ ♪ ♪ *London Welsh MVC - Bread of Heaven*

