

**A Committal and Memorial for  
Robert Frank Leeves**

**10<sup>th</sup> October 1938 – 20<sup>th</sup> March 2019**

**Family Chapel, Langley Crematorium, Eastbourne**

**And Ridgeway Court, Heathfield**

**12<sup>th</sup> April 2019**

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*Music: Enya, Marble Halls.*

Good afternoon everyone.

We are here for a brief committal ceremony, returning the body of Robert Frank Leeves to the elements from which he came. We will meet again shortly in Heathfield to celebrate his life with a wider group of friends.

The poet WB Yeats wrote of the cycle of life and death:

*“Death does not end life but is part of it, one of nature's transformations as we work our way through its cycles. Death informs life. It is not simply the mother of beauty, it is the mother of life itself, for how could we conceive of life if there were no death? And it is only because we conceive of life that we know we must taste it lingeringly, try every flavour and nuance, drink in experience while we can. Death and life are dependent upon each other, like order and chaos, neither concept being possible without the other. So there should be no fear of death, which is omnipresent, part of life. Welcome it into your arms, for it is but rest; for you lie in nature like a heartbeat. “*

No energy is created in the universe and none is destroyed. The warmth that flows through us in life will remain here and still be part of what we were. So you can be sure that the energy passed on by Robert is right here amongst you and always will be. He will live on, through the memories of those whose lives he touched. Please stand if you are able.

*Robert, we feel privileged that you lived.  
We grieve that you are no longer with us,  
but we know that you will live on in the hearts,  
lives and memories of those who knew and loved you.  
We remember with gratitude your character and all your qualities,  
The things you made, the things you told us, and the love you gave.  
And now with love we leave you in peace.  
And with respect we bid you farewell.*

This part of your farewell is now at an end. Once the music starts, the door will be opened. Please leave in your own time.

*Music: La Paloma*

## **At Heathfield**

*Music: Enya, Marble Halls*

Good afternoon, everyone.

We have come together today to remember, with love and appreciation, the life of Robert Frank Leeves, husband, father, and practical man, who died on March 20<sup>th</sup> in hospital, with Susan and Nadia at his side.

We are here today to celebrate Robert's life. My name is Felicity Harvest and as a celebrant member of Humanists UK I have been asked to tell his story. Humanism is not simply a non-religious outlook on life, it is a philosophy which is based on human reason, enquiry, and care for the world around us. Humanists believe that people are good, that community is important, and that friendship is a driving force in the world, so this is a very appropriate way to say farewell to Robert.

I'm sure that all of you here today, whatever your own beliefs, agree that we should do our very best to live a good life, and to support others to do so. These are values we all share as human beings. So people of all faiths and those of none are welcome here today. Over the next half hour we will hear stories from Robert's life, and there will be time for contemplation, when you can remember Robert in your own way or in terms of your own beliefs.

As you remember Robert's life today, I hope you will feel able to smile at memories of the good times, even while you grieve his loss. Though you will always miss Robert, you will have many memories of him too, which you will take into the future. And that will give him a kind of immortality.

I didn't have the pleasure of meeting Robert, but I have had a long talk with Susan, Nadia and Tony, and I have also taken some quotes from a lovely piece Tony wrote about his father-in-law

## The Tribute

The Leeves family came from this area, and you will find roads around here that are named after this long-standing Sussex farming family. Robert was actually born in Peacehaven, the eldest of Alice and Maurice Leeves' four children. Maurice was a painter and decorator, but Robert's early memories were of him in wartime, when he was a glider pilot in 1<sup>st</sup> Airborne, who was wounded at Arnhem and spent some time as a prisoner of war. His memories of his father's days in the military, and his own love of the sea, meant that Robert really wanted to join the Navy, but they would not take him because he was colour blind. Instead, when he left school, he got a job with an electrician, repairing radios and that new-fangled wonder, televisions.

And then there was the girl next door.... Susan. From the time she was thirteen they went on "dates", long walks across the fields chaperoned by her eldest sister. And by the time she was 19, they were finally allowed to marry.

They started married life in a rented semi-derelict house in Newhaven, with the living rooms in the basement, the bedroom on the top floor, and nothing much in between. Encouraged by Robert's brother Rodney, who had already headed off to Australia, they decided to go as "Ten Pound Poms", in search of better opportunities.

It was tough at first. They found themselves in a hostel when they arrived, and Robert's trades qualifications weren't recognised. But in the end the strategy worked. Robert found work with Dulux, and they had Nadia, and bought their own house for the first time. By 1975, they were able to come back to England and buy a house here, at Telescombe. They came back in the January, and Nadia suffered the double shock, as a 5 year old, of coming from an Australian summer to an English winter, and starting school as soon as she arrived.

House buying, once they had started, became a habit. They both had those practical skills, so they would buy a house which needed some care and attention, do it up, sell it, and buy somewhere else. Robert worked in various jobs, including at the docks, but his real love was this renovation work, and the gardening, decorating and everything else that went with it.

In recognition of the fact that, all his life, Robert was a practical man at work and at home, here's a poem called "It couldn't be done" by Edgar Albert Best.

*"It couldn't be done"*

*Somebody said that it couldn't be done  
But he with a chuckle replied  
That "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one  
Who wouldn't say so till he'd tried.  
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin  
On his face. If he worried he hid it.  
He started to sing as he tackled the thing  
That couldn't be done, and he did it!*

*Somebody scoffed: "Oh, you'll never do that;  
At least no one ever has done it;"  
But he took off his coat and he took off his hat  
And the first thing we knew he'd begun it.  
With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin,  
Without any doubting or quiddit,  
He started to sing as he tackled the thing  
That couldn't be done, and he did it.*

*There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,  
There are thousands to prophesy failure,  
There are thousands to point out to you, one by one  
The dangers that wait to assail you.  
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,  
Just take off your coat and go to it;  
Just start in to sing as you tackle the thing  
That "cannot be done," and you'll do it.*

Though sometimes, of course, the way in which Robert did things were a bit strange. This is from Tony: *“He was organised. His bed, which he loved, always looked the most comfortable place in the world, everything in the right place, but it still looked like you could just sink into it and dream. He would know where all his tools were and would try his hand at most things. And yet, he could be the most cack-handed right-handed person I knew. Things like hose pipes always seemed to be fitted so pulling them on and off could be described as a saga. Ignoring the easy way, he would sometimes go the hard way just because he could.”*

Holidays were a big thing for the family. They went back to Australia several times, to visit their relatives who had stayed there, once stopping at Bali on the way back. They went to Guernsey, the West Country, the Maldives, and the Isle of Mull, and Robert and Susan went to Sri Lanka together. And of course, they went to Spain, which led to the next big adventure.

In 2001 Robert retired, and he and Susan moved to Spain, where they had a wonderful, sociable life, with both locals and other ex-pats. Once again, Robert would turn his hand to anything, and was particularly proud of his paella, which even their Spanish friends approved of. But this period of their lives ended when he began to have health problems, and they felt it was sensible to move home to England to be near to family, and the NHS.

Although he recovered from the issues which had brought them home, he began to suffer from COPD, as a result of that period in Australia when he was mixing paints, and from skin lesions, also a result of the Australian years. Until he had his stroke, though, he remained active and engaged with life, doing much of the housework as well as continuing his social life.

He loved his family, and was heartbroken when things went wrong for them, and enormously proud when they went right. Nadia was awarded her Doctorate only in his last few days, but hopefully he was aware of that wonderful news.

And as you all know, he was a talkative man. Here’s Tony again: *“He was likeable, he was the sort of person you could sit down with, and have a drink or two with, feeling entirely at ease and relaxed. The conversation was always funny, intelligent, and quick witted. He would never let your*

*glass go empty, even if you had to get the drink, and top up his glass for him. His sheer joy at 'shooting the breeze' over a glass of spirit was totally infectious.....He was outgoing, always the first person to speak to you when you walked into a room. He was no shrinking violet which added to his charm. He was gregarious and affable and well-liked and respected."*

When I asked Susan, Nadia and Tony whether any of them wanted to speak today, they said no, but they also said that Robert would have done had he been here!

His opinions on life were formed not only by his own experiences, but by his extensive reading, both of the newspapers and of non-fiction, particularly about the sea, and about travel. Even when his sight went, he would listen to talking books.

And he was canny, or as Tony said *"A bit of a rascal [who] had a way of persuading people to fall in line with his way, even if you knew his way was not the best"*. Of course, I asked for examples, and was told of the huge archaeological stone he tried to dislodge, or his advice to the family to ask for 3 lumps of ice in their whiskey glass, because he knew the Spanish bartenders usually put 2 lumps in and then used that as a measure of how full to fill the glass.

He wore his heart on his sleeve and could at times be quite emotional – he was in floods of tears when he heard his longed-for daughter had been born, and again on her wedding day. He could get angry too – which was when his Australian accent would be heard at its strongest. And he had a loud voice. Tony again: *"He would greet you shouting across a valley in the warmest and friendliest manner, waving his arms [in a way that] would elicit a whole neighbourhood response of waved arms"*

Towards the end of his life, his various illnesses, as Nadia put it, *"cramped his style"*. Eventually his eyesight deteriorated to the point that he could no longer get out on his scooter, and he was increasingly frustrated. As Tony wrote: *"He was full of fun and had a love of living, making his later illness all the more difficult to deal with"*

We often think of death as a cruel enemy, taking away those we love, but for those who are suffering or who have reached the end of their

endurance, it can come as a quiet friend, closing the curtains, blowing out the light, and settling us into a last sleep, free from pain and weariness.

And I hope it was so for Robert.

### The Reflection

We are now going to pause, so you can reflect on Robert in your own way.

### *Music and birdsong*

### Closing Words

I hope you have gained some comfort from being here together today. As you return to your work, your homes and the routines of your daily lives remember how you felt sharing these moments. Take away with you your own memories of Robert and his place in your lives. In our relationships and friendships; in the work of our hands and minds; and by our example, some essence of us remains. So Robert will always be part of your lives; and in remembering him you will be paying him the greatest tribute.

The family would like to thank all of you for being their friends and supporters, and the staff in Jevington Ward at the DGH, particularly the night staff who made sure that Nadia could get there to say her final goodbyes. They would also like to thank Heathfield Age Concern, who have been wonderfully supportive, particularly Brian who has gone way beyond his duties as a driver to support Susan.

Susan and Nadia would also like to thank you for taking time today to commemorate Robert, and for allowing them to share their memories of his life. They invite you to join them at the buffet and to partake in a toast. The buffet may not contain anything as miraculous as Robert's paella, but I'm sure will be almost as good.

Take care of yourselves, and of each other.