

# A celebration of life

## Noel Gibbard

12 December 1922 – 7 December 2018

Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2019, SportsAble, Maidenhead

*a personal goodbye*

Humanist  
*Ceremonies*

Humanists UK is a registered charity no. 285987 and limited company no. 228781 in England and Wales. Humanists UK, 39 Moreland Street, London, EC1V8BB, 020 7324 3060

Born in 1922 in Hornsey, London, Noel was the 3rd child of May Mallard and William Gibbard. His sister Rosalie and brother Roger already in school, Noel's devoted mother developed a close relationship with him. He loved to hear her play the piano and acquired a life-long love of the instrument. The son of a headmaster, he was raised to value learning and, as is typical of this era, brought up with a firm hand.

His childhood home in Folkestone, 11 Hasborough Road, held happy memories for Noel. On returning there in recent years he recalled the well-worn cycling routes and his happy life at school, in particular recollecting one school master, who, noticing his potential, held a soft spot for him, affectionately calling him 'stupid boy'! A phrase which stuck with him always.

At the age of seventeen, war broke out and Noel was evacuated to the countryside to live with an aunt, which he described as a torrid time where he was cruelly treated and toilet paper was strictly rationed! No matter, as before long he was to leave his childhood worries behind in exchange for fighting for his country, training at the officer cadet training unit and studying in Kings College as a Royal Engineer, or 'Sapper' as they were known.

Posted all over the UK and Europe, Noel rose through the ranks, proving himself a proficient engineer and a strong leader. While working as a Lieutenant of a 60 man-strong regiment, he suffered a motorcycle accident and was sent home to Folkestone for recovery - a memorable sea voyage, where his injured body was forced to endure the effects of every crashing wave. He wasn't to know that this accident saved his life until days later, when his regiment came under friendly US fire, and many were sadly killed. This had a profound effect on Noel and perhaps instilled in him the belief that you only live once, and the need to live life to its fullest.

During the war, Noel's mother also died. Losing his mother at such a young age was devastating to him, and this sadness he carried with him always. However, not one to dwell on what might have been, and having healed his wounds, Noel was posted to Dumfries, where his luck was to change. On a chance visit to the

post office, his eye was caught by a beautiful girl. He asked her to a dance and the pair fell in love. Her name was Elizabeth, or Betty, and meeting her changed Noel's life forever. He took her to the beautiful viewpoint on Boar Hill and asked her to be his wife, and before long they were married and expecting Anne, their first child.

The happy couple lived next to the Wilkinson's and their lodger E.M Forster, who popped round to supper with them on occasion. Noel continued to study Engineering at Cambridge University and was rewarded with a second. When Anne was born, the proud parents had her christened in Kings College chapel by the Vice Provost, and the new family set about building a life for themselves in the suburbs of London. They named their bungalow 'KingsNorth' representing Noel's College and Betty's northern roots. Anne was soon blessed with a baby sister, Sheila and then a brother, David and the three siblings built a strong and close relationship, under the safe and loving roof of Noel and Betty.

Accepting a job offer in Slough, the young family then moved into College Avenue, which was to be their forever home. Unfortunately, Noel hated his new position, but swiftly found his job for life at Haden's in London, as a Heating and Ventilation Engineer. Sheila was born soon after and life fell into a familiar rhythm, catching the same train to London each morning and returning to a hot supper, in time to kiss the children goodnight. Noel enjoyed his job, and rose through the ranks to a managerial position which he loved. His motto, 'take care of the shareholders, take care of the clients but most of all take care of the people' stood him in good stead, and when he was offered the role of director, he turned it down to remain on the floor as a Manager.

Weekends were spent cleaning Joey, the family car, mowing the lawn, completing the cryptic crossword, and of course reading with the occasional afternoon nap! The family also enjoyed drives to the beach at Bream Sands and picnics on Winter Hill.

Noel's work gave him the opportunity to do what he loved most; designing and executing bespoke engineering for landmark buildings such as the Shell building,

in London and Leicester Royal Infirmary. Learning from the best, he soon became an expert in his field. His academic papers on heating and ventilation engineering were well regarded by the Royal Institute, who on one occasion, awarded a medal to Noel for his outstanding research, still used in this industry today.

His dedication to work made holidays very precious. Some of Anne and Sheila's happiest memories with their dad are centred around Scotland, where they holidayed regularly to see Betty's relations. Noel would drive through the night, while the children slept in the boot of the car. Anne remembers at around the age of 4 begging to be played with on the beach, after the long car journey. With Sheila just a baby, Noel drew the 'short straw' and this nickname, 'Short Straw' for Anne stuck.

As Noel's earnings grew, so did the length and comfort of these Scottish holidays. They started out in a basic hut in Half Mark or staying at 'Glenelg' Uncle Glen's hut, then self-catered at Rock Cliff on the seafront, where they drew water from the well and fresh milk from the nearby farm. Sheila and Anne have very happy memories of these idyllic family holidays in Scotland, climbing Scottish hills and exploring the countryside, with David and their four cousins.

The love the family had for the great outdoors led Noel and Betty to purchase a caravan and Europe beckoned. Many a blissful summer was spent touring the quiet and picturesque roadways of France and Italy, hunting down the tiniest riverside and seaside caravan sites to park up for the night. Everywhere they went, Noel made friends and loved nothing more than to while away the hours putting the world to rights and exchanging stories.

Time passed and the children grew up, creating families of their own. Noel and Betty became grandparents to Joanna, Jen, Philippa, Duncan, Nicola and Andrew.

In 1982 he retired and gradually settled into a slower pace of life. On a typical day, Noel could be found listening to classical music, looking out over the garden with a good book. A tough critic, he scored all the books he read out of 5 and kept this record in a little book, now one of the families most treasured heirlooms.

Whilst his musical tastes stayed firmly in the past, everything else about Noel looked to the future. He revelled in the new technology introduced to him by his grandchildren, taking much excitement from identifying childhood hangouts on Google Earth with Pif. and taking a keen interest in modern architecture, which he would explore the workings of at any given opportunity.

Retirement also brought time to explore his beliefs, and Chiltern Humanists provided Noel with an outlet for philosophical discussion amongst like-minded people. Keen to share his belief in science and reason over religion, he bought books for the grandchildren 'Parenting Beyond Belief,' and took an active role as Chairman and, ever the engineer, chief photocopier!

A lifelong member of the Labour Party, Noel would not hold back from political debate. Using the pseudonym of Ian Woods, he wrote articles for the Times and took a keen and vocal interest in national and global issues.

Noel also combined his love of driving, with his need to help others. Volunteering for the Maidenhead Voluntary Bureau he got people where they needed to be. He had calculated that all this driving had clocked up 294,822 miles – he had driven to the moon and was on his way back!

Despite, or perhaps because of the busy life they led, Noel and Betty decided to take the help of Eva, a Housekeeper from Slovakia, who lived with them and very soon became a part of the family. Referring to her as their adopted granddaughter, she remained an important part of Noel's life until the very end.

They also made the big decision to split the plot at College Avenue and build a new home for themselves in, what was then, their garden. Noel greatly enjoyed this new project, but sadly Betty died before it was completed. The devastation

of losing his lifelong love was immense. However, not one to be held back, Noel threw himself into completing the house and moved into it, only to be struck with yet more tragedy a decade later, the loss of his son, David. The grief of the parting of these two important members of the family was felt as keenly by Noel as it was by all of the Gibbard children and grandchildren. The holes left could not be filled, but life moved on regardless. As Noel had after the death of his mother, he focussed on the future. If he couldn't do anything about it, he didn't want to think about it, and in this way he continued to live life.

The comfort and freedom of his caravan brought great joy to Noel. In his final years he continued to take long drives to see friends, caravan in tow. On one occasion, he invited fourteen lunch guests to the caravan for April Fool's Day, at the Festival Hall car park! Needless to say, the last laugh was on him that day! Shelia also remembers the story of one of the caravan wheels falling off whilst driving in Scotland! This all added to Noel's sense of adventure and didn't phase him in the least.

The diagnosis of Lymphatic Leukaemia was not stopping Noel either. Just last spring, he took the caravan to Portsmouth, and when this was no longer an option, he acquired his 'toy'. This motor-scooter gave him the freedom to explore wherever he went. Remaining closer to home than usual gave Noel the opportunity to spend his final year with his loved ones. He enjoyed several delightful outings scooting amongst the trees at Westonbirt Arboretum with his Piffel. Anne recalled a happy day spent last September collecting apples in the basket of his scooter, while exploring the grounds of Otley Hall.

Noel's final months were painful and difficult. Mary, Judith and Sheila brought comfort to him in his final hours and, holding the hand of his beloved granddaughter Philippa, Noel died. Although he is no longer with you, his life story will forever be a part of your own and his legacy is in every one of you. There will be no other life like Noel's. His uniqueness will be held in your memories and hearts and you are lucky to have been enriched by having known him.