



A Humanist Ceremony to honour the life of

Geoffrey Tomlinson-Roe

13.7.1928 – 31.10.19

On November 21st 2019

at Westmill Community Centre, Hitchin

Celebrant: Mary Porter of Humanists UK



Good morning. My name is Mary Porter. I am a Humanist funeral celebrant and I have been asked to lead this brief ceremony today. Geoffrey was brought up as a Baptist – but

beyond his youth he had no religious faith. As to his funeral he was very firm in his view that he wanted a very simple ceremony, with no fuss, no drama, no religion. As you know he has already been cremated. So today we are having this simple ceremony to honour Geoffrey's life and to mark his death and your loss, and later when refreshments are served, for you to share your memories informally in the company of those who cared about him.

The basis of this ceremony is the story of his life that he told to my colleague David Brittain over six years ago when Geoffrey had been led to believe that his death was imminent. I have added to this story with comments that Geoffrey and Peggy made when I met them nearly four years ago, when it was clear he had more life to live.

So back to the beginning, Geoffrey Tomlinson was born "out of wedlock" - as they put it then - on 13 July 1928 at Chalkdale Workhouse, not far from here in Hitchin. His mother, Joyce Tomlinson, had been a chambermaid at Burghley House, a grand country house near Stamford. Geoffrey's father, who worked as a butler there, washed his hands of her and the whole affair. Joyce - being unmarried and pregnant - was chucked out and left homeless. Rejected by her family, she was forced to go to the workhouse where she gave birth. Geoffrey's beginnings were made even worse because he was born with double pneumonia and a double rupture.

With nowhere to live, Joyce was forced to abandon her son - but even the workhouse wouldn't keep baby Geoffrey for more than a few days. Moreover, no orphanage would take a child under the age of two, so a temporary surrogate home had to be found for him. Geoffrey's start in life didn't look good.

However, a kindly couple did take him on: two profoundly religious Baptists - Reverend Alfred Henry Roe, and his wife Nellie Georgina, who was a lay-preacher's daughter. They lived in Redhill Road, Hitchin, which today is on the site of the Walnut Tree Café.

When his two years with them was up, Briar Patch orphanage in Letchworth offered to take Geoffrey on, but by then the Reverend and Mrs Roe had formed a strong bond with Geoffrey, and they decided to adopt him.

His mother still made regular visits to Geoffrey, but eventually the Roe's stopped her visits, and Geoffrey was brought up as their son. In fact he always thought he was their son until the Roe's natural daughter told him that he wasn't.

Being brought up as a strict Baptist meant that his childhood was much more formal than for most children in that time. He attended Sunday school twice every week, and as a young child was required to join a temperance society and formally promise never to touch the “demon drink”. But he has fond memories of his adoptive parents, and in adulthood adopted the surname Tomlinson-Roe in their honour. He also felt indebted to Alfred in particular for his exposure to a wide range of educational experiences – including regular visits at weekends to the museums in London. Geoffrey would claim in later life that he got most of his education from those visits.

He attended Wilshire Dacre Primary school in Hitchin, and moved on to Old Hale Way Secondary School once he was 11. Hitchin’s population was growing fast, and Old Hale Way School was built to cope with the burgeoning young population.

The area he lived in was rough, and the youngsters formed into street gangs, so it was a matter of early survival that young Geoffrey learned to be a bit of a toughie. However, at least he had some security, and his future must have seemed settled by then, so Geoffrey remembers those days with some affection.

However World War 2 had just begun; his school education would be undermined somewhat by the fact that he and his classmates were required to spend much of their schooldays working as unpaid potato-pickers on local farms.

But another tragedy would soon enter his life. In 1942, when he was just 13 or 14, Nellie Roe fell ill with stomach cancer and died. And, worse, the following year Alfred would also die – and from a similar cause. Both these deaths involved much suffering, and for this to happen to such profoundly religious people who were so kind, shook the very foundations of his own religious belief. He would never be the same again, and Geoffrey would eventually become a non-believer.

He was a bright lad, and in spite of his domestic situation, he still managed to finish 8th in his class – out of maybe 35 children or more! But he was now 14 years old, and at that age a working-class lad of those times was expected to leave school – although given his domestic situation, he must have presented a problem to the authorities.

Geoffrey was on his own again, and he would be transferred briefly, he remembers to another workhouse in Manor Road, Liverpool where was prepared for a life at sea. There was in fact a merchant navy training school just across the Mersey in Wallasey so he

possibly attended that. By 1944 sixteen year-old Geoffrey Tomlinson-Roe had signed up for the Merchant Navy – where he stayed for the next three years.

Geoffrey had come from a very hard background, and he described himself as a mouthy, yobbish kind of youth, who had learned to survive by being tough, but his new environment in the Merchant Navy could be tougher, and he soon learned to be courteous and respectful. In later years he would regard his time in the Merchant Navy as being the making of him, and in later life he would wish more than once that he could speak to his naval master at sea to thank him for ultimately becoming his mentor, and teaching him how to live a more tolerant, considered way of life.

But even so, he was rarely good at taking advice and on one occasion when he ignored some safety instructions he became whipped-up in some ropes at sea, and acquired a rupture. This would eventually lead to his medical discharge. This was 1947, the war had been over for two years, and Geoffrey Tomlinson-Roe, now nineteen years old, returned to civilian life a much wiser young man.

He returned to Hitchin, reacquainted himself with his old friends – including what was left of his old gang - the Westmill Gang - and he began work in the building trade as a freelance painter and decorator. Geoffrey's Merchant Navy experience had helped him develop into a mature and resourceful young man, and – with the urgent post-war demands on the building trade - he soon became very successful in his new profession.

You might suspect that young Geoffrey enjoyed the single life of a young man. He was sociable, and a good dancer, and he no doubt made the most of every social opportunity. It must have been sometime around 1949 or 1950 that, whilst working on a project at the Lister Hospital, he attended a dance and came across a pretty young trainee nurse called Alma Dwight. Alma was a good dancer herself, and was immediately attracted to this rather charming and good-looking young man.

The couple began to see each other regularly and soon became inseparable friends. In retrospect, it must have seemed inevitable that they would fall in love, and so they did. They married at Berkhamsted Register Office on 16th July 1952, and – after a honeymoon in Hove - set up their first home in Hitchin.

These must have been very happy times for them both. Dianne turned the couple into a family when she was born in 1954, with Susan following almost exactly a year later.

By now, Geoffrey was running his own successful construction business, and in 1957 the Tomlinson-Roe family moved to Stondon, into a brand new bungalow that he had arranged to be especially constructed. Geoff was just 29 years old. The young workhouse boy had already come far. The family continued to grow. Martin was born in 1963, and Jason would complete the family when he came along in 1967.

I think the children had the usual happy childhood memories of long hot summers and snowy winters ... of Christmas's and holidays – and particularly holidays in East Anglia. They still recall fondly the day in Great Yarmouth when they found a salt water pool that was much too cold for them to get in. And when Dad got impatient and decided to demonstrate how they should just dive in, they watched with genuine amusement as the cold water – which was truly freezing – took his breath away and caused a shock to his body that struck him helpless in the water ... Like a stranded fish, said Susan!

Geoffrey always loved music: classical, ballet and the big band music of his dancing youth. Martin has come equipped with some of Geoffrey's favourites so we will take a break here while he plays us something for you to think about your special memories of Geoffrey.

So let us go back to his family, starting with his fractured relationship with Joyce, his mother. Alma organised a surprise meeting for Geoffrey with her. It seems that this may have led to a closer relationship after such a long period of being on the periphery of each other's lives. They had never completely lost contact, but it seems that after Nellie and Alfred stopped her visits in those long far-off days the relationship inevitably became rather distant.

But there had been some major changes along the way. Joyce had rebuilt her life and married – and Geoff discovered no less than eight half-brothers and sisters. A shock for anyone, although most of them had either emigrated - or were about to emigrate – overseas to South Africa. Only one sister – Sheila – remained in the UK. She now lives in Edinburgh, so sadly is unable to be with us today.

Geoffrey's business continued to prosper, and in 1972 the family moved to their dream home, The Cobbles, and this is where Geoffrey would stay for the next 20 years. I mention Geoffrey alone here, and with good reason. Not everything in family life is meant to last a lifetime, and in the middle 80's Alma and Geoffrey divorced. But they now had grandchildren on the way, and Geoffrey and Alma both kept in close contact with each

other and the children, and they would soon find new fulfilment as grandparents to five grandchildren, all of whom gave them both great joy and enriched their lives!

Geoffrey sold his business in 1979, and – as he put it himself – retired. But he was still just 51 years old, and he would never just sit still. He soon began security work at what was then the Smith Klein French laboratories in Stevenage. It was whilst he was working there that he met a rather charming widow, Peggy Stevens, who was working in the canteen. Romance would enter his life again, and in fact they were living together for the last 30 years until Geoffrey went into the nursing home some weeks before he died. Peggy describes him as kind man who was always good to her. And they had a good life together.

Peg retired in 1989, but it would be ill health that would finally force Geoffrey to leave his employment two years later; he had acquired ongoing heart problems since the mid 1980's. Now he would begin his real retirement.

He also left his dream home. Much as he loved gardening, its acre-sized garden was clearly far too big for him to manage, and the house was too large for them too. So they moved to Hitchin where they would be nearer services. They were living in Wellingham Avenue until moving earlier this year to a retirement apartment in Wilshere Court.

So in 1991 Geoffrey retired again. He was still only 63 years old, and his story would not be over yet – not by a long chalk! Travel was his theme now, and they travelled far and wide – sometimes with their friends, Brian & Rene, and Daphne & Benny to France, Germany ... And they went to the USA every year. They even went on long tours of Australia, one of which lasted for three months! And while we are remembering friends, there are other special friends that he particularly wanted to be mentioned today: Michael and Helen, David & Doris, and Christine and Paul.

These last years were a very happy period in Geoffrey's life. Peggy was by his side, they went dancing all over, including in the old Westmill community centre, and they enjoyed their travel – and for Geoffrey in particular, this seems to have been a period of education for him – which he enjoyed immensely. He always had a lively mind, and that was quite clear when I met him. But, just before Christmas 2012, Geoffrey fell critically ill, and was rushed to hospital. His aorta had burst, and for a while there must have been a critical moment as he came within a whisker of death. But as we know, he survived, and he was patched up. One of the medical staff described him as a “tough old bird”, but that's probably an understatement. He was eventually discharged, but with his discharge came a sobering message. He would be unreasonable to expect to live for more than another

two years, and indeed, his health could well deteriorate very rapidly indeed, well before then.

Such experiences must have concentrated his mind and caused him to reflect on his own demise. He had met my colleague David for the first time on the 6th October 2009 when he conducted Alma's funeral at Biggleswade Care Home. And so it was that on leaving hospital Geoffrey contacted David saying that he wanted a simple ceremony like Alma's. So they met for Geoffrey to tell him the life story that forms the basis of the tribute.

As we all know Geoffrey lived a good five years beyond his expected maximum two years. When we met nearly four year ago he came across to me as a very matter of fact man, very philosophical about what most of us would see as a very hard time when he was young. Talking about these times Geoffrey said that he didn't think of himself as hard-done-by and that his life was no worse than others. His philosophy was that you just get on with it and make the best of bad job. He was very appreciative of his children, mentioning that when he was so seriously ill there was always one of them staying in the house.

Geoffrey said he was not worried about dying: just adding that those who love him should just get on with their lives. In the end he had a difficult last few months – with a number of falls, more illness and declining capacity, so much so that he was admitted to The Milford Lodge Nursing Home, for his final weeks. His family are so thankful for the excellent care he received there,

As Peggy it puts they had had a good life together and, although she misses him, the time was right for him to leave. So while we often think of death as a cruel thief robbing us of precious life, for Geoffrey we may think of death as a kind friend easing him into a very welcome rest.

So let me end this tribute with a message that Geoffrey wanted you to hear today. What he wanted to say to you - and this is in his own words: ***Thanks for putting up with me.***