

# A celebration of life

# Martin Thomas Gilbert

8 February 1921 – 17 November 2019

10am – 12pm, 16 December 2019 Bogan House, Totnes

*a personal goodbye*

Humanist  
*Ceremonies*

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## Tribute

Martin Thomas Gilbert was born in Folkestone on 8th February 1921, the first of two sons to Charles and Dorothy Gilbert. Charles was a pioneering electrical engineer at a time when electrical installation was the cutting-edge technology, and had his own Electrical Contracting Company in Folkestone - anecdotally, John Logie Baird did some of his early experimental work developing television in C P Gilbert's workshop. Martin won a scholarship to The Harvey Grammar School in Folkestone, and, after matriculation in 1937, he started an apprenticeship in London with Marryat & Place, a firm of electrical engineers. He would work with tradesmen for an eight week stint, then have four weeks of lectures at Northampton Polytechnic as he studied for his Higher National Certificate in Electrical Engineering.

All started to change in July 1940, when a 'Defence Area' was established on the Kent coast opposite France, and all "non-essential" businesses were being shut down – their owners and staff being moved out. The Gilbert family's business was closed, and their cliff-top home was also taken over by the Royal Artillery, leaving the family homeless as well as business-less.

Because Charles was a nationally known Electrical Engineer, with many contacts around the country, he was snapped up by Sunderland Technical College with the aim of him teaching the recruits of the newly formed Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. Charles and Dorothy left for Sunderland with whatever they could carry, leaving Martin to continue his work and study in London.

But as the war progressed, and the bombing raids on London took their toll, Martin's options were becoming more and more limited. When the Luftwaffe took out the YMCA on Tottenham Court Road where Martin had been renting a room, the only possessions he could salvage were a T-Square and a now tattered dressing gown that had both been hanging on his door. His father, by now well ensconced in Sunderland – even as his mother still reeled from the culture shock – told him that he

could continue his HNC at the Technical College in Sunderland, and that firms up there were crying out for good electricians.

And so, as Martin wrote in his book “Who Won The Battle of the Atlantic?”

“...I took the train from King’s Cross, carrying my small suitcase and my toolbox, all that I now owned in the world.”

He arrived in Sunderland, and took work at a Wearside shipyard, where he worked almost non-stop, fitting ships with all the ‘Mackem’ lads, whose potential influence was another worry for Dorothy. He worked flat-out, like everyone else there – usually working until 9pm every week day - whilst also completing his HNC.

Once he had qualified, he knew that he had to move on. He was ready for a new part of his life to open up. The alternative seemed to be to stay on until they made him a chargehand in the shipyard, and live out his days like the old fitters he had apprenticed with until retirement. He felt that he had already made a considerable contribution to the ‘war effort’, but wanted to go further. So in 1943 he joined the Navy as a Volunteer Reserve, with considerable expertise in the new area of RADAR.

At the end of the war, Martin went to New York to return a lend-lease transport ship to the US Navy. Returning on the Queen Mary, he met Jean. She – along with her younger sister – had been sent to relatives in Canada for ‘the duration’ and they were now heading back home. Martin and Jean began dating, but the Navy knew that they wanted him too. Even as most of the RNVR’s were being sent home, Martin’s knowledge and experience were a prize to hold on to. They offered him a 25 year commission as an Engineer. The Navy posted Martin to the Med for three years, Jean posted him ginger cake and Lancashire cheese. I am assured that there will be ginger cake – made to Jean’s recipe – for all to try at the end of this ceremony.

Martin and Jean married in 1950 in St Helens, Lancashire, and honeymooned here in Totnes – a town that Martin first saw when he was stationed at Dartmouth in 1944, and ‘borrowed’ a landing craft to see just what lay further up the river Dart. He later said that this was the very best way to approach the town.

Jean followed Martin through all of his postings, with the exception of his time in Korea. But after numerous peripatetic years in Naval married quarters and three children – Anthony was born in Glasgow, Ruth came later in Folkestone and finally Sarah in Plympton – they bought Highfield on Kingsbridge Hill in 1961.

Martin retired from the Navy in 1971, having attained the rank of Commander. He sometimes mused that he may have gotten further promotions, had his wife not been so prominent a member of CND – the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – but he never told her that – and would never have dreamed of warning her off! Although the story that Jean told apparently differed in the minor detail that she resigned from CND in order to protect his career!

But, still, his own views on nuclear weapons were perhaps also a little at odds with navy protocol, as he held serious reservations about nuclear weapons especially the ‘independent’ British ones, but otherwise he believed that the navy had a justifiable role in peacekeeping in the 1950s and 60s. I can imagine he must have been a bit of an oddity in the typical wardroom, but his technical expertise was in always demand.

After the Navy he joined a company his father had started, making plastic electrical conduit -- Gilflex. Although it was sold to MK in the 1980s, Gilflex trunking and conduit is still being made and sold. This led to trade and standards organisations, lots of belting up and down the growing motorway network to meetings in a bright red 1275 GT Mini and, according to Sarah, some very fine suits, then off to international conferences on standardising systems.

These days, when we buy cheap Chinese-made toasters and kettles in supermarkets, we have faith that the things won't blow up or kill us. Few people realise how many years' negotiation it took to make that happen. Martin played a significant part in that too. Coming home from a conference in Germany once, Martin said "That's the first time I have been addressed as 'Herr Engineer', as if it were 'doctor'. " He also observed that the perfect conference has the meetings chaired by a German and the hospitality arranged by the French!

The 1970s and 80s were the sailing years – building up from a Mirror dinghy by degrees to a catamaran that he moored below Sharpham. Cars were left in the field next to the mooring when on trips, and Ruth recalls returning from one such expedition to find that an inquisitive cow had licked the red mini all over! Martin loved to explore the Devon coast, then across to France with crews of friends and family.

He loved live music and would chase a good jazz band from pub to pub from Plymouth to Exeter and back; the Teign Valley Stompers were long-time favourites. Martin and Jean were active members of the Totnes community – they went to much of what the Dartington Arts society put on, helped with the Sea Scouts, had a spell on the Carnival committee, and even the local council – Jean took a year's stint as Mayor of Totnes. Later they were involved with the museum society.

Meanwhile, the house on Kingsbridge Hill required major reconstruction. Sarah remarked in her emails whilst setting up this mornings event that those who knew those days will feel the work in here today to be an appropriate reflection of those times!

She also told of a time when Martin was engaged in repointing the wall between the property and the road, and being harangued by Jehovah's Witnesses about his beliefs, or lack thereof. After a couple of these probably circular arguments, Martin

gave them a copy of a book that had served him well - *The Ethics of Belief*, by W. K. Clifford. It was surreptitiously dropped back into his post-box a week later without comments, but they never bothered him again.

Highfield proved quite costly to run, so Martin and Jean often had paying lodgers – students and others to help keep things afloat. They were always treated as a part of an ‘extended family’. This included one dark and wintery night when a couple of rain bedraggled young students from the twin town arrived at the door, lost, speaking only French and looking for the local hostel. Jean simply said that they had found it and brought them in!

In fact, one visitor had remarked, “I like being with your mother, because I want to be as nice as she thinks people are...”

Martin had always tried to be fair and straight in all his dealings with people – including, as much as possible, his own children. As Sarah said “He treated children as people. He never talked down to anyone – and always gave an appropriate answer to the questions asked.” Discipline with errant children was never an ‘event’ - he never shouted or raised his hand – but everyone understood when they had done something wrong.

Alongside all of the many other projects that Martin and Jean were involved with, one of the most impactful was ‘Friends of Urambo and Mwanhala’, or FUM - an aid group run by Devon farmers to support Tanzanian farmers. They had installed diesel maize mills in villages to reduce the physical workload on women, but the mills fell into disrepair through poor maintenance. So a certain retired engineer proceeded, by his trade-marked sheer bloody-minded persistence, to set up a mechanics' training scheme through VSO. Now there would be trained staff to keep the mills working.

Sarah said that she can still picture him examining a toy; a giant plastic threaded bolt with two nuts, property of her then infant son, and observing how useful it was for

imparting basic mechanical concepts. Martin and Jean visited Tanzania and went on the obligatory safari, but most of their travelling was closer to home - France and Spain, and Britain.

Rod Smith, the current secretary of the Friends of Urambo and Mwanhala, contacted the family on hearing of Martin's death. He wrote:

"Nicole and I were both saddened to hear of Martin's death. He was a crucial member of FUM when I first came on the scene, and I have to say was, for me, the most inspiring. (with) Martin's no nonsense style and his ability not to wear rose-tinted spectacles all the time, he and your mother made a good team I think. Then more or less the first task I undertook in Tanzania for Martin was to check up on the Jean Gilbert Memorial Library he had set up in her memory in Urambo."

Jean died November 30<sup>th</sup> 1991 from cancer of the ovaries. After her funeral, Martin – previously always the pragmatist - hugged his children for probably the first time. He then switched into practical mode. There were always things to be done.

Within a year, he knew that he didn't want to be alone. He figured he had maybe 20 more years in him (it turned out to be considerably more), so needed to do something about this. Without telling anyone, he joined a dating agency. This would have been a slightly more long-winded arrangement in those pre-internet days. So it was that over Christmas 1992 Martin announced "I am going up to Lincolnshire to meet up with a woman I've met. Her name is Anita." He reassured his children that "moving on isn't forgetting".

Anita was a tough cookie – she had her own backstory of hardships which we won't be going into here – but she navigated and negotiated a place in her new family very well. She and Martin married in 1993.

Martin changed course a little with his new bride – as he said “She’s not interested in boats.... That nearly ruled her out at the start!” She may not have been interested in boats, but by all accounts she was a demon Scrabble player – one of the few games that Martin himself would play (although he wasn’t against a few hands of pontoon or poker with his children on wet camping trips).

Anita also made a place for herself within the town, and within the hearts of her family. The pair moved to Follaton Lodge on the very edge of town in 1996. Martin became intrigued by the notion that it had been a turnpike or toll house, and began investigating the history of such places. This culminated in a pamphlet he wrote for the museum. Anita took to making Follaton Lodge their own place, in her own way.

Martin was, by now, beginning to slow down. His hearing loss – which had started as ‘gun-deafness’ - was becoming more pronounced. But still, he said “the secret to enjoying life is to enjoy what is still possible.” Anita died – also of cancer – in 2012, shortly after Martin’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party – which she had organised.

By now Martin was in need of looking after, so he advertised through Tones Caring for a part-time housekeeper/carer. What he got was, to a great extent – a surrogate daughter in Tina Trendall. She would keep him well, in body and spirit, all the time making sure everyone was up to date on his progress. Other family members jokingly remarked that it was a good job she was happily married herself or they could be looking at the third Mrs Gilbert!

A worthy mention must also go – at this point – to Stuart Dance, who came in to take over all of the practical things around the lodge that Martin was no longer capable of – the gardens, running repairs, the roof, the wood pile and so on.

Martin's asthma was now getting the better of him, he was losing his sight and his hearing loss was now quite profound. But the family were still around, and Ruth came and stayed each Christmas.

Last year he developed an oedema from his lack of mobility, and one foot developed gangrene. Last Christmas was spent in Torbay hospital, with discussions revolving around amputating his foot. This never happened, and the infection subsided, but Martin now had prostate problems, and so a full-time live-in carer was required – line-managed, naturally enough, by Tina.

Two of Martin's grandchildren, Terrence and Alison, went over to visit him a few weeks ago. They arrived on the Saturday at breakfast time, and Martin informed 'Tez' that he had projects in mind for him to work on. Martin asked for a drink. When Tez asked what he would like, Martin said "How about a brandy!" Tez, I am told, being ever the gentleman, thought "...your house, your rules..." and provided. Over the course of the next few hours, Martin became quite unwell. His breathing became laboured. Terrence and Alison took him to Torbay hospital for a chest X-ray.

But it was pretty clear that Martin was at the end. He had plans to live to a hundred, and, in his own twinkling way, was apparently enjoying being the last man standing from his family and friends. But his ailing body got the better of him. Terrence and Alison rang the family the morning after his admittance to say that the end was near, and that if anyone needed to come and see him it was best to do so now. They also said that they would stay with him, no matter what. Martin died peacefully in the loving care of Alison and Terrence at about 11pm on Sunday the 17<sup>th</sup> of November.

