

A Celebration and Remembrance of the Life of
Gordon James Cunningham

28 August 1930 – 3 July 2017

Ceremony at Bulkington Community Centre

11:30am, Tuesday 25 July 2017

Followed by Committal at Heart of England Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Gordon James Cunningham was born in Coventry on 28 August 1930. His parents were Tom, a factory worker at the Standard Triumph, and Marjorie – better known to all as Madge – who later worked in the wage offices at Dunlop. He was the younger of two children with an older brother, Norman.

He had what he described as a very happy childhood, always loving being outside and experiencing freedom while the adults were being kept busy. He joined organisations that went camping, and particularly remembered camping on the coast of France with the cubs in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War. At the outbreak of war, Norman was relocated during the evacuation, but Gordon stayed in Coventry with his parents. When his children and grandchildren were young, he always described this as a fun and exciting time, running over the ruins of houses to collect shrapnel, untroubled by the bombs. However, in his later years he also told them about how he walked right across the city with his mum early in the morning after the worst night of the Blitz to see if his dad, who was manning a post on top of Courtaulds, was still alive. It was a harrowing experience for a young child, seeing many dead.

Gordon showed great promise at school, particularly in the sciences, and also in sport. He played rugby for the school and continued to play in adult life. He was a cheeky boy, playing tricks on shopkeepers not just every April Fool's Day but more often.

One often talks of love at first sight, yet seldom is this truer than in the case of Gordon and his future wife. It was the 6 June 1945 and the eleven-year-old Maureen Holland was out playing tennis with her friend. Walking past the tennis courts was fourteen-year-old Gordon Cunningham. They caught each other's eye and started to talk. Something clicked. A few days later, Maureen received a handwritten letter from Gordon asking if he could be her boyfriend – a letter only very recently discovered by their family. It was the beginning of a life together that would last seventy-one years.

Maureen was a remarkable young girl – strong-willed, independent and ahead of her time – who carried these characteristics through her adult life and into her old age. She made a quick impression on Gordon's parents who loved her and treated her as their own, with Madge becoming like a second mother for her. Likewise, Gordon was adored like a son by Maureen's parents, Connie and Peter. Gordon and Maureen courted for six years, and during that time their two families became good friends. Maureen would regularly join the Cunningham family on seaside holidays, and on one occasion, both families squeezed into a Standard Triumph for a long drive down to Spain.

Upon finishing school, Gordon took an apprenticeship as a chemist with Wyley's and on completing his training he was awarded the Freedom of the City of Coventry. At eighteen he did his National Service in the RAF, which he enjoyed, being outdoors and active, though he joked that not only did he never get into the air, he never even saw a plane. It was only Monday to Friday, and he would come home at weekends. Despite this, he would still write to Maureen every day during the week.

Gordon and Maureen were married on 27 March 1951. At first they lived with Maureen's parents for eighteen months, during which time they had their first child, Greg, and Gordon became a proud father; but they soon decided that what they really

needed to do was to strike out on their own. They were both still young, and this was seen as a very bold step for them to take; but this was post-war Britain, a time of hope and prosperity. They were determined, and in 1952 they bought their first home in Morland Road in Coventry.

In 1953, Gordon joined the Coventry and Warwickshire Police. At first it was simply a way to provide financial security for the family, but it would become a career of thirty-two years. He was not a natural policeman, being a fairly unassuming character, but he looked on it as being an important public service. The job came with its sacrifices; he would only have one Christmas day off out of every three years, for example; but it also had its perks; he had lots of stories to tell – from putting the drunks on milk trains for a prank, to body-guarding Eartha Kitt when she walked her dog in Coventry city centre (not officially, just so he could chat to her like a smitten fan). Home life also became easier after he was promoted to sergeant, with more regular hours and more time to spend with the family.

In 1955 they became a family of four with the birth of Julia. Julia's memories of her early home life are of being happy, comfortable, and well looked-after. Gordon was a kind, gentle, and dependable father, who played a lot with the children, with games of cricket in the park, and since he wasn't able to spend quite so much time with them due to his work, he would ensure that whatever time they did have together, he would make it count! There would always be a family holiday every summer, two weeks long with two different places to stay, each filled with fun and good memories. On farms, and holiday camps, his primary concern was always whether the children were enjoying themselves. And they invariably were! When Greg fell in love with engines and machinery, Gordon even arranged for a week's holiday on a boat.

In 1970 the family moved to Wolvey and into the house that would become the family hub, Tryn Arron. Gordon loved his home and garden. During his youth, he had helped his father on the allotment where they used to grow chrysanthemums to sell, and this early learning paid off later in life at Tryn Arron, where Gordon and Maureen created a picturesque oasis of calm which they would enjoy together in their later years looking out upon it, relaxing in their easy chairs and holding hands.

After thirty-two years of service, Gordon retired from the police at the age of fifty-five. With his new-found freedom, Gordon enjoyed three decades of companionship with Maureen, during which time they loved to travel, with family holidays to – amongst other places – Spain, Italy, and the former Yugoslavia.

Gordon took joy in early retirement as it meant that he was available to be a part of his grandchildren's upbringing. Lee described him as being the most significant male role-model in his life, with a huge impact in his formative years, to the extent that he and Andrew often used to slip up and call him 'dad'.

In 2009 Gordon and Maureen decided the time was right to downsize and find a new home. Tryn Arron was becoming difficult to manage at their stage in life but they were sad to let it go. They were delighted then when their daughter Julia took on the home, so they could still enjoy the garden when visiting.

Gordon lived a long and happy life, but in his final years he began to struggle with dementia. As time went on, it became more and more difficult for Maureen to care for him. He fell and broke his hip in 2013, and the next year he moved into Attleborough Grange care home. Here his quality of life improved considerably, and both he and the rest of his family were able to have a more pleasurable time in his final years. The family describe the care he received as outstanding and genuinely loving.

In February last year, Maureen suffered a fall which led to a difficulty with mobility and she decided that she wanted to be with Gordon in Attleborough Grange where they were together for Maureen's final days. She died in April last year, but by this time Gordon's dementia had diminished his understanding to the extent that he was spared the grief that the loss of Maureen would have brought. Later that year, his son Greg also died. It was a difficult year for the family but again Gordon was untroubled by a grief that would otherwise have been so severe.

Gordon died peacefully and without pain on 3 July at Attleborough Grange Care Home. He was with his family during his final hours. With them by his side he was visibly comforted, even managing to smile knowing they were there. He will be sadly missed.

How will Gordon be remembered?

He was a well-organised man, and together with Maureen they would regularly put together their five-year plans to look at how they would secure and develop themselves financially. They had both come from insecure and hand-to-mouth backgrounds, but proved themselves to have very good household management, and their children never felt the insecurity they had. They even saved enough to support their son Greg to go to university, which they were proud he achieved.

He played the trumpet as a member of the police silver band, and to the best recollections of those that saw and heard him play, he was very good. Julia remembers him cleaning his trumpet at home and on one occasion he accidentally fitted the valves upside-down, only discovering his mistake whilst performing in a concert shortly afterwards. He spent the next hour miming his part, to the amusement of those sitting close to him. He and Maureen enjoyed going to brass and silver band concerts in his retirement as part of their social life.

He was a huge fan of chocolate; in fact he was a chocoholic, whether for puddings, cakes, biscuits or the Belgian chocolates his family brought from Luxembourg. Whenever he emerged from the kitchen, it would always be with one chocolate biscuit in his mouth and another in his hand ready for when he was done with the first one. His family were happy to know that the last thing he ate before he died was a chocolate pudding at the care home.

He was a very thoughtful and helpful neighbour, with Jenny and Jessie who lived nearby saying that they felt safe knowing that he was around. If they needed anything, he was only too happy to go round to fetch something from the loft or to help with any practical problems they might have in the home. What goes around comes around, because he and Maureen had the same comfort in their last home where they knew their neighbours Sandra and Les would always be there for them.

He was a man of routine: at 10am it was time for a cup of tea; lunch came at noon; coffee at 3pm; and tea at 5pm. This routine never changed, and he had an uncanny ability to just know when it was time. One example Julia calls to mind was of a summer day when the family had been sitting in the garden for hours without a clock or watch to look at, when suddenly Gordon declared it was time for a coffee. When they stepped into the house the clock was reading 3:00pm precisely. Quite how he did it may prove to be one of humanity's greatest mysteries!

He was a great animal lover, and was upset by any form of cruelty to animals. He loved his dog Mitzi, a small Daschund/Corgi cross that terrorised the window cleaner and ignored all the rest of the family, only having eyes for Gordon. He could do no wrong by Mitzi, and Mitzi could do no wrong by him. He was the only one allowed to stroke her, and she would turn into a soppy little furball in his company.

He was a family man and proud of his children Julia and Greg and his grandchildren Alexandra, Andrew, and Lee. He was happy to see his grandchildren settled down, Alexandra with Pascal and Andrew with Mark, who Maureen and he welcomed as another grandchild. In 1972 he visited Greg in Rhodesia where he was working, and spent four weeks having a fantastic time. He was very proud of what his son was achieving as a mechanical engineer and the holiday he laid on for his parents was one of their happiest memories. Later he was pleased to welcome Greg's wife Waltraud to the family and she remembers that he was the first of her new in-laws that she met and his kindness to her. In Julia he saw his own character, his kindness, and love of animals. He was proud of the person she had become.

He had a great sense of fun, and the arrival of his three grandchildren opened up a new world of opportunity for silliness. As they grew up it became increasingly difficult to take a photograph of him without him pulling a silly face because he knew it would make them smile. He had a particular penchant for what became known among his grandchildren as "grandad jokes" – groan-inducing puns and rhymes that were so bad that they were good. Another great source of pleasure was his annual April Fool phone calls to his grandchildren, which kept coming long after they had grown old enough to have him completely sussed out. Lee remembers spending every Saturday with his grandparents, walking in the country, watching videos and eating cheese sandwiches with orange juice that became ever associated with his grandad. One very early memory is of his grandfather teaching him chess, and Gordon's happiness when Lee eventually started to beat him regularly, showing grace in defeat and pleasure that his grandchild was learning. When Alexandra said that she wanted a pony, Gordon gave her the next best thing by letting her ride around on his back, which was probably more fun anyway. She remembers his early morning routine of getting up for the morning paper and having some time to himself, feeding the birds in the garden while hushing away the pigeons, and then making her the best cup of hot chocolate. When the children came round, he would be the one to let them bounce on the furniture. There were no boundaries; he just loved to see them enjoying themselves. He could at times be a little more firm and stern, but you could always see the naughty little boy underneath. One memory from Andrew and Lee is of a snowy day in winter when they sat looking out the window at Tryn Arron while grandad built a snowman and a snow giraffe with the aid of a broom handle for a

neck. They both say how they often went on holidays around UK with their grandparents, without whom, as they say, they would have been unable to holiday much at all. They had day trips too and without their help would not have had so many opportunities to learn and grow when young, missing out on key experiences at such a crucial age.

As the grandchildren grew up their relationship matured, and Alexandra recalls sitting in the pub with him sipping on his pint of Guinness and enjoying the atmosphere. He would wave her off on her bus when she set off to university or the airport. Andrew recalls his grandfather driving him to nights out when he was a teenager and picking him up again when he was the worse for wear to stay over on the sofa bed at Tryn Arron. Lee remembers being given his first drink of whiskey when he was young or being slipped a £20 note when he went off to university with a wink and a “don’t tell your grandma!” It was too sweet that Lee couldn’t bring himself to tell him that he hated whiskey or that £20 was barely going to cover his taxi from the station.

He was a man who kept a quiet presence in the home, in contrast to the more dynamic Maureen, yet as a couple their relationship was that of a perfect team; best friends and soulmates, utterly devoted to each other and to their family. He was a kind and gentle father, touchingly illustrated by Julia’s memory of him being the only person that could take the rubber bands out of her hair without it hurting. With his family was when he was at his happiest. He was progressive for his generation with household duties evenly divided, an excellent example and role-model in this regard for his children and grandchildren for his stoical nature; always happy and willing to help others simply through his giving nature rather than any consideration of reward.

When a person has lived a life that is long and full of love and happiness, it would be wrong to allow their final days to define them. Gordon died after living through the struggles brought on by dementia; but this was only a short chapter of his life. He will be remembered as a man of fun, kindness, strength, humour, dependability, service, experience, and wisdom amongst all that knew him. Before his dementia had progressed too far, Maureen and Gordon set aside days to talk through long reminiscences, discussing their whole lives, agreeing how lucky and happy they had been to have had children and grandchildren that they loved, and to have experienced far more than they had ever imagined in their youth.

These are just some of the memories of Gordon James Cunningham – though I’m sure you’ll have many of your own. A life that has ended, but whose legacy will live on through all of the lives he has touched. He is gone now, but he will not be forgotten.

Humanist
Ceremonies