

A celebration of life

Geoffrey Berry

14 June 1947 – 15 August 2020

Friday 4 September 2020, Park Wood Crematorium



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Geoff was born on 14th June 1947, the third of four children to George and Elsie Berry. He grew up with his big sisters Barbara and the late Sonia, and his little brother Philip, in Heptonstall, and the two boys, especially, shared in many childhood antics, including feeding all manner of breakfast cereal through the mincer clamped to the table top to concoct some new mixture. In some ways Philip was a ready-made fall guy for Geoff, like on the rainy day they tried out their bow and arrows indoors (sadly the cardboard box target they set up was no match for the metal-tipped arrows, and they took a chunk out of the door of Elsie's new oven! Geoff's immediate comment: 'Dad won't be happy with what you've done!'). But if anyone else tried to cause Philip trouble, Geoff was incredibly protective, and continued to look after his baby brother all their lives.

At school, Geoff showed a proclivity for the practical lessons, woodwork and metalwork, and in his spare time, too, he preferred working with his hands, pursuing his fascination with cars, especially Minis. One of Philip's favourite memories from then is of the Mini Geoff had with the sun roof; every year, Geoff would take him across to Blackpool and drive along the front with Philip sticking right out of the top of the car to get the best view of the Illuminations. Given his talent with anything with an engine it was no surprise that, when Geoff was given the chance to train as a mechanic, he leapt at it. He started out working for the Post Office in Bradford, attending evening classes to gain his qualifications and also proudly achieving his Class 1 HGV licence, before moving to BT when the Post Office was divided.

He was still a teenager when he first met the love of his life, Diane. Both their dads were friends through work, and so Geoff came along one time when George called over for something to eat. Diane said he was an absolute gentleman that first encounter, very attentive (Geoff was obviously rather taken with her and on his best behaviour – Diane said it didn't last!). But he certainly put the effort in when they were courting, frequently driving the 25 miles to Diane's home in whichever Mini he currently had on the road, bringing her back to his stomping ground for an evening out, then repeating the 50 mile round trip to take her home again. On many of those early dates, the lovebirds were accompanied by Philip, who would do his best to cramp their style by sitting in between them at the pictures!

It didn't seem to do the romance any harm, though, and Geoff married Diane on 24th July 1971, at Carlinghow Parish Church in Batley, taking two nights away in Blackpool as a honeymoon. The newly-weds had a newly-built house to come back to, even if they had not a stick of furniture to fill it with, no more than a borrowed carpet in the hall. But they were determined to make it their home, and Geoff took on mechanicking work in his spare time to help fund the furnishing and decorating. They had still to finish around the outside of the house too; all the neighbours on Wherwell Road mucked in to help each other with driveways and garages. Geoff turned his grimstone garage into a proper workshop, even digging a pit underneath it so as to get under his motors better, and he spent many hours in there, happy or grumpy hours depending on how the tinkering was going!

Geoff was always a fan of motorbikes too, from his teenage years riding his own machine and childhood visits with his mum and dad to watch the speedway. He returned to that sport with Diane, following Bellevue Speedway; Geoff even had a period where he helped out some of the big names by attending to their motorbikes while they were racing. He and Diane often ended a night at the speedway in The Prospect Inn in Halifax, where they met a huge number of people, many of whom became lasting friends. One of them was Debbie Hollingworth; Geoff and Diane attended her wedding and became godparents to her two children, Kate and Ben. Debbie is still their hairdresser, and Geoff thought the world of her. He and Diane also counted the landlord and landlady of The Prospect Inn, Mick and Jackie, as good friends, and in fact, for a few years, they took on the role of publicans themselves when Mick and Jackie went on holiday; they hugely enjoyed the experience, though not quite enough to take on licensed premises of their own.

Geoff's interest moved on from speedway to motocross, and this time he wanted to get stuck in himself. He raced for Hebden Royd Motocross Club, competing across the north of England. Diane was obviously delighted with this hobby, especially when he chose to rebuild a motorbike in their spare room, occasionally even filling the room with smoke! Geoff was nothing if not brave out on the circuit, but not always lucky; the first time he made it into the lead, he promptly came off his bike and broke his leg! But, as always, he and Diane were lucky in the friends they made through the sport, friends like Brian and Wendy, who they reconnected with in later years through another shared interest: line-dancing.

Geoff was always a big fan of country music, but it was quite by accident that he and Diane fell into the line-dancing scene, finding themselves in the midst of a session after they called in to the Great Birchwood Club in Lytham St Annes when they were staying over there in their caravan. They were soon hooked, loving the music but also the sense of community. Geoff kitted himself out with the full outfit, cowboy hat and all, and always had a great laugh at the many meetings and festivals they went to. It was at line-dancing that Geoff and Diane got to know their great friends Kevin and Elaine, and it was with them that they first ventured on board a cruise ship, heading round the Med in 2004.

That was by no means the last time Geoff and Diane cruised, not by a long shot. They explored the waters of nearly every ocean in the world, highlights including Japan, Canada, Alaska and New England. They also enjoyed holidays in Europe, heading to Tenerife at least once a year, and travelling with or visiting friends; when Ben and Yvonne moved to Italy, Diane and Geoff, along with other good friends Mick and Gill, were very happy to go down to keep them company for a few days, and they all had some fabulous times on the shores of Lake Maggiore.

The six of them had all met through their involvement with Halifax Amateur Operatic Society, though neither Geoff nor Diane had any real desire to tread the boards themselves; they were happier backstage. It was their dog, Monty, who was the star of the show and who drew them in to the productions, when he won an audition for a role in Annie (though Geoff did have his very own speaking role when Monty and their other dog, Max, were on stage at The Alhambra in Bradford, no less). But generally, Geoff was happier building sets, something he and Ben spent hours at, bonding over their very similar senses of humour and very different tastes in music. Geoff loved 'something with a tune' (a reference to Ben's inclinations towards jazz), and greatly enjoyed the show tunes from the Operatic Society productions. He and Diane would often go down to London for the weekend and take in a musical, and had recently started taking Kevin and Elaine's grandson, their godson, Josh, down with them. They knew all of Kevin and Elaine's family, including their children Karen, Tracey and Karl, from many happy weekends spent at their static caravan in Lytham, and were regular dog-walkers and dog-sitters for Tracey's baby, Frank.

It should be said that Monty and Max were more to Geoff and Diane than just superstars of the stage; having no children of their own, their dogs were their family. Golden Retrievers all, from Sandy, to Sam, to Misty, then Max and finally Monty himself, they were all loved to bits. Geoff liked to get out walking with the dogs, and he and Diane often used to take the touring caravan to Filey because it was such a fabulous place for them. When they started going away where the dogs couldn't come too, Geoff and Diane made all sorts of arrangements to ensure they would never go into kennels; Geoff's aunty and uncle, Margaret and Keith, used to come and live in the house so as not to disturb the dogs' routine, or they would be welcomed in at John and Maureen's, or Diane's parents; wherever they were, they would be spoilt rotten!

At work, Geoff stayed within BT but moved into the engineering division; he was a great problem solver, and a real perfectionist, and thoroughly enjoyed his job there for more than thirty years. He was respected by his colleagues, but more than that, many of them counted him as a friend; and some of them have remained friends for life, like John and Maureen Ramsden, and Lisa and Martin Bishop. And, of course, there was Neil, or Nellie to his friends; he and Geoff were great buddies, affectionately known as Laurel and Hardy; they did loads of jobs together and got on famously.

Geoff was always a fan of football, playing himself in a five-a-side team with mates from work, and on the professional side he supported Manchester United. Yvonne's dad Steve sometimes had season tickets available, and Geoff and Mick would join him at matches when they could, styling themselves as 'The Three Amigos'. Geoff's support for Man U was perhaps the only thing that could have come between him and Philip (who is a staunch Liverpool fan!). Certainly nothing else did; they were always on the phone to each other, and Geoff was still always there to look after his little brother, from lending him the money to take Angie away on honeymoon, to helping him build his own car, to running him round after Philip's motorbike accident.

Philip and Angie always gave Geoff and Diane a warm welcome at theirs, and they would be round frequently to sample the delights of Angie's chip butties, straight from the pan Elsie had bought her 47 years ago and tasting better than anyone else could make them.

Or they would get together with the younger generations of Philip and Angie's family too: their children, Wayne and Lisa, their partners, Charlotte and Nathan, and their grandchildren, Olivia and Lewis. All Geoff's family was very important to him, and he was also a proud uncle to Linda, Tony, Terry, Kevin, Samantha, Deborah and Richard, and great-uncle to many more, as well as a godfather several times over.

Diane asked me to express her gratitude to everyone, family and friends, who has leant their support in recent months, especially to Angie, 'her rock'. Also a big thank you to Tracey for her daily calls to Diane, to make sure she was doing alright. And a massive thank you to the Gatenby family, for 'stepping down' from being invited here today, so that friends could be here instead (another unfortunate limitation forced upon us all by the current situation). All of you have helped to make a difficult time that little bit easier.

And it has been really difficult; no-one expected, when Geoff was enjoying a Caribbean cruise at Christmas, that we would be here now. He was still working up until lockdown, doing maintenance work for Turning Point Care Homes, and was still his normal self: presenting that hard exterior, or trying to, but totally soft underneath, sensitive, caring and thoughtful. That is the man you all knew and loved, and that is the man who is missed so deeply today.