

A celebration of life

Peter Saunders

30 July 1926 – 6 January 2020

2.30-3.30 pm, 10th January 2020, Golders Green Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Tribute

Peter had a long and extremely active life which he lived to the full. He was friendly, easy-going, and had an irreverent take on life.

According to his father PK and his birth certificate, Peter was born on 30th July 1926 in Johannesburg. According to his mother, who was actually present at the birth, he was born on the 31st. He spent his early childhood in South Africa with his grandparents and had happy memories of that time. He was not so happy, though, when he and his sister Jane were sent back to the UK to boarding school in Kent. His father, who was a mining engineer, was very much occupied in setting up the Saunders Valve Company to sell a diaphragm valve that he had invented for use in the mines. PK would later move to America and remarry, having Margaret and Sandy by his second wife.

Peter completed his schooling at Blundell's in Devon, and loved singing in the choir. He was called up in 1944, only to break his ankle in a hopping race during training. That was the end of his military career, but it may have been a lucky escape, and it helped him to get a place as an ex-serviceman to study Physics and then Architecture at St John's College Cambridge.

He married Patricia Annesley in 1954, and they had four children: Emma, Justin, Will and Tabitha. Peter enjoyed playing with his children and Tabitha remembers climbing all over him. He tended to do with them the things he liked to do himself. He had loved having his own tool-shed when in South Africa, so it was natural for him to set up a lathe and teach his children how to make things too. Tabitha remembers the brass ring she made as well as other things in wood – it was a shared activity, and they had fun together. She also remembers the little cottage they had in the middle of Knole Park, where they played croquet and Peter turned cartwheels in the garden. He happily gave his children axes and knives to play with from an early age, and built them lethal swings. In spite of his best efforts, they all survived and flourished.

After working in private practice in the partnership Gore, Gibberd and Saunders he joined the South-west Regional Hospital Board in the mid-seventies, where he worked on big projects, including Fulham, later Charing Cross, Hospital. He was very

proud of an innovative sterile room he designed there for young mothers with auto-immune conditions, which helped to save their lives.

Peter's first marriage ended in 1973. He then married Valerie Smith, and they had a son, Tom. They moved into 3 Fairfax Road in Chiswick, and enjoyed many happy times there. His sister Jane moved to Canada and had three children (Rick, Suzie and Frances). Despite the distance Peter remained close to his sister, her children and grandchildren. They have continued to stay in touch throughout his life, most recently when they all came to London to visit in 2018.

Peter was happiest when he was active and out in the fresh air, preferably on a bike. He enjoyed the physical challenge, and it was without doubt one of the ways he kept in good shape. It also became something to share with all three sons. He rarely set a good example though. When Will was stopped by a policeman for riding, in London, with no hands he was asked, 'What would your father say if I told him?' Will's answer was, 'Well, he was the one who taught me to do it!' He cycled all over London almost until the end of his life, including two days running from Chiswick to the British Museum at 90 – never with a helmet, but always with a battered tweed hat.

Finding a bargain suited his abstemious nature, as did doing things for himself. He continued to do DIY and home repairs – or 'bodging', as Justin describes it – throughout most of his life. Allied to this was his hatred of waste – any waste. He didn't just keep odd bits and pieces in case they came in handy later, he often tried to rescue discarded objects, like the armchair he once spotted in a pond, despite Justin's pleas to leave it be. Peter also had a habit of eating food long after its use-by date, regarding mould as an inconvenience and food-poisoning as an occupational hazard. He did enjoy his food, but was a man of routine when it came to meals. He made a lot of pea soup; his lunch consisted of pitta bread, taramasalata and olives for 30 years, and he liked to have a glass of port with Shropshire Blue cheese each evening. But only after 5.00 pm, just as television was only for after 6.00 pm!

He had an irreverent sense of humour. He really enjoyed the songs of Flanders & Swann and recalled weeping with laughter when he first heard Tom Lehrer singing on the radio. He enjoyed larking about and ribbing his work-mates, and took it in good part when the joke was on him.

His traditional English eccentricity was a source of amusement and endearment to the people that knew him; he would spontaneously burst into songs from the 1920s; surprise Tom and his friends as teenagers when they came back after the pub with late night ironing sessions in his Y-fronts; answer the phone by saying 'Saunders' in a deadpan voice; or go on his 'morning constitutional' walk before breakfast with a walking stick and a silly hat while on holiday with Tom, Claire and their family in Portugal.

He did not find it easy to get close to people – he always described himself as 'socially inept' – but paradoxically, he was friendly, easy-going and universally liked: Tabitha remembers all the local kids coming round to help him wash the car when she was young. And he had some very good long-standing friends, one of which, Theo, he had known since school, and Andrew Parkin – his best friend in later years. He particularly liked engaging with strangers, whether it was fellow concert-goers when listening to Tabitha performing in *The Messiah*, or the people who came from all over the world to stay at the B&B he and Valerie started up after he retired. After Valerie died in 2010, he took in lodgers, charging them ridiculously low rents, and they were good companions.

Peter is survived by his five children and eight grandchildren. We'll hear directly from some of them soon, but first we shall have a song from Tabitha.

Personal reminiscences from the family

Tabitha Barratt

My father and I spent a lot of time singing together and when I was little he gave me a ukulele and taught me how to sing a couple of songs – and I sang them ever since... He also taught me an Austrian mountain song. He taught me the tune and then he would take the harmony and sing in a high falsetto voice ... and I would collapse in giggles because it sounded so funny. Peter and I went to the Queen's 90th birthday celebration which was a street party and as the Queen went past with Prince Phillip, Dad said, 'the Queen and I, 90 both of us ...' He obviously felt a great affinity with her. It was a party for the Queen's charities and the Queen is the patron

of the choir that I sing in, so we were allowed to go. [Tabitha sings *The Last Rose Of Summer*]

Justin Saunders

Many years ago Emma was sent to a posh boarding school in Norfolk where, amongst other things, she learnt a poem that had been composed by members of the British Army during the second World War. It concerned the daughter of the Sergeant Major.

Emma then taught it to me of course, in the summer holidays during a trip to the South of Ireland. We recited it to Dad, whilst walking up a mountain. When we'd finished, he said he didn't realise that his little lambs had quite such dirty minds.

The following term, Emma started her secondary education at a Grammar School in London, and I returned to my boarding school in Cambridge.

And what with Christmas approaching, I found that the poem she'd taught me went very well to the tune of 'God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen', and even benefited from having the line 'Oh tidings of comfort and joy' added at the end of each verse.

I was giving a fine rendition of this in the school changing room when the Headmaster appeared, and requested that I write out the lyrics of my song for him to give my parents when they next came to take me out for the day. He asked me where I had got it from, and I said that my sister had learnt it at her school.

I duly wrote it out, switching the words where ever possible for ones that were less controversial, but frankly it wasn't easy, and the overall meaning was still perfectly clear.

And I gave it to the Headmaster and lived in dread for the next two or three weeks as the day of a visit from my family approached.

At last, there came a Sunday, when I headed off to Chapel with all the other boarders, as was normal, then returned later just as the Saunders family jalopy came bouncing up the drive.

My parent's cheerful hellos were met with a mumbled response from me that the Headmaster wished to see them in his study, and, somewhat baffled, they set off to find him.

I sat in the car, miserably, waiting for the punishment that was coming my way, and utterly convinced that whatever it was would be fully deserved.

The time dragged appallingly, and then they reappeared, heading towards the car. I cringed and winced as Dad approached me. Then he patted me on the head, and said 'Don't get caught next time'.

And I sat there with my mouth kind of hanging open. It remained like that for most of the day.

Dad told me later that having ushered both my parents into his study, the Headmaster then ushered my mother back out again, to save her blushes, presumably, then showed him what I had written. Dad said that as he read it, he had to fight with himself to maintain the solemnity of the occasion.

He said he was kind of shaking by the time he got to the end, and the Headmaster said, with outrage in his voice 'Your son has told me that he learnt this from his sister. This is what comes of sending her to a state school'.

Many years later, I saw, amongst Dad's papers, an envelope, on which he'd written, very carefully, 'Justin's Dirty Song'.

If it now happens to reappear, and I think it might, I'd quite like it back. I'm thinking of having it framed.

Will Saunders

When Peter was 73, he came with me and Justin on a cycling and wild camping in the highlands. On his 50-year-old one-speed post office bike, the same he'd cycled to work on for decades. There's even a picture of it in the programme. The next year he came again, on Tom's lighter bike with gears, as a concession to his hips, one of which was later replaced, allowing him to say, as he swung his leg over the saddle "I haven't been able to do that since I was 75".

When Peter was 86 – 86 for chrissakes! – he came to stay with me on my boat in France, and insisted on playing his full part. So one day, we're coming into a lock,

he's poised up at the front, waiting to jump off onto the quay with the rope, I'm at the back steering. And I see his face crease up with pain, and he starts to slump, because his hip has come out of its socket, and so there's nothing holding him up. And I see in slow motion what's going to happen – father falls into the lock, father crushed between quay and 10-tonne boat, it's not good. But no, he just bangs his hip back in with his fist, and carries on.

Peter came to see me every year for many years. On the last day of his last visit, when he was 91, he cycled 20 miles, half of it off-road, and all of it with one good eye and no sense of balance. How many of us might still be doing the same when we are 91? I always said I was trying to kill him, but usually just ended up nearly killing myself.

When Peter was 92, he was still cycling all over London – Monument, the British Museum, and every sunny day to Kew Gardens – until he was 92. And then he fell off his bike, and became progressively more housebound. And because of his generosity with his house, his lovely young friend Alex came back into our lives and became his carer for the last year of his life. He was in good spirits and frankly remarkably good health, right up until he decided that he'd had enough, and died a few days later. What an astonishing old man! And surely all any of us can do is to die at the time and place of our own choosing. So I'm sad, but not for him, only for myself and the rest of us who will miss him.

Elodie Saunders – letter to Grandpa

Dear Grandpa Peter,

I don't know if you can see this letter or not but I just wanted to know that I love you with all my heart. You were such a lovely and heart-warming man and I loved all your stories and songs. Even though you are not here in the real world you will always be here in our hearts.

I loved spending time with you, we went to Zisis where you would always order the same thing. You taught me the shoe-lace tying song and we went on holiday together many times. We would also spend Christmas together every year and pop

Christmas crackers together, and when you lived with us I was always the one to give you your port and crackers every night.

I would be a very different person if you weren't in my life. We laughed, we cried, we made beautiful memories. We had a very special relationship that no-one else could ever have and I will always forever miss you. I love you more than the universe and back.

Love you loads, Elodie

Rest in peace

Tom Saunders

Hi everyone, thanks for coming today, it's very touching that you've all come to pay your respects to my Dad and also to support us.

So, I'd like to share some of my memories of my Dad.

I had a great childhood growing up in Chiswick. I have an assortment of nice memories, for example:

1. When I was four I became obsessed with the idea of having a submarine and nagging my Dad and showing him my designs until he made me a wooden submarine for the bath.
2. Dad built me a tree house in the garden which my friends would play in, much to my mum's nervousness.
3. My mum was very generous and loved doing things for other people, for example she would always arrange for me, my Dad and Justin to go on skiing trips every year to Val-D'Isere in the French Alps. He would have been in his late 50s and 60s by then, so it was very impressive that he could still ski all day. He would dust off his school French and attempt to use it when he was over there, a bit like the British Policeman in *Allo Allo*, which I always found very embarrassing, but it's admirable now I look back on it.

4. Dad taking me and my friends to my mum's cottage in Wiltshire, where we would run amok with catapults, hunting knives, and axes or making fires while he repaired the property.
5. Mum and Dad dancing in the kitchen (to embarrass me, mostly).
6. Mum and Dad running the B&B, taking in guests from all over the world, many of which would come back year after year.

My dad was a clever man, and always had a passion for learning about the world around him. I would come home and find him studying a watch movement with an eye glass, he would discuss mind-bending astrophysics questions with Will or be reading books on palaeontology or ancient history.

His intellectual curiosity continued up until he died, watching David Attenborough documentaries and reading *New Scientist* religiously.

My Dad liked to share inappropriate jokes or limericks with his best friend Andrew Parkin. My favourite being the young man from Dundee:

*'There was a young man from Dundee
Who got stung on the leg – by a wasp
When asked did it hurt he replied 'Not in the least'
Good job it wasn't a hornet'*

There were many others, such as the 'Bishop of Buckingham', but it's probably best I don't go into them.

I think my Dad was happiest just hanging out with my mum and our cats at home and watching TV shows such as *Only Fools and Horses*.

He was devoted to her, but nonetheless romance was not his strong point and he struggled with difficult tasks such as remembering their wedding anniversary which was on Christmas Eve every year!

His devotion continued up until the day she died, in June 2010.

When I met Claire after university my parents treated her like a daughter of their own. They would welcome her into their home, she would stay with us and she would always spend Christmas with us.

Their relationship continued to strengthen over the years. Through Claire, my parents also got to know Claire's parents Laurence and Marilyn and the rest of their family well, and they have been amazingly welcoming to my parents and subsequently my Dad over the years.

I remember Laurence and Marilyn inviting my Dad to a garden party at their house a few years ago. My Dad, in his mid-80s by then, decided to go for a swim; he managed to swim, but he had forgotten about his two metal hips, and started to sink!

My dad was always a regular fixture in my family's life. We would see him almost every weekend, we would all go to Kew Gardens together, he would spend the day with us at our house, watch films with us on family movie night, or spend Christmases with us.

He came on numerous holidays with us; including coming with us to Portugal for his 90th birthday, the Isle of Wight or our trip to Italy in 2018; where he loved and appreciated the architecture and scenery and took full advantage of the numerous ice cream stops with Elodie and Theo.

Despite claiming to not being keen on children, he adored our two:

He thought Elodie's singing was fantastic, and would like to sing along with her

Theo would go into his imaginary battles, which always engrossed my Dad, and he would say "I see World War III has started"

He would sit and chat the children, always interested in their day-to-day life.

He was a big fan of Claire; they were good friends and always had a laugh together, he would love to hear her play piano and always appreciated the support, love and care she gave him over the years

... ..

I couldn't have wanted for a better father. He was much loved by my family and I. We will miss you, Dad, but we won't forget you.