

A celebration of life
Thomas Brown Hunter

9 September 1945 – 22 June 2020

10.00–10.30 am, 09 July 2020, New Southgate Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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This ceremony of farewell is for Thomas Brown Hunter, husband, brother, father, granddad, great-granddad, adopted dad, adopted uncle and friend. Many of you are watching online because of the restrictions placed on us as a response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Even though you are all – even those in the chapel – watching in relative isolation, it is heart-warming to know that so many other people are doing the same thing at the same time, and I know that Chris and the whole Hunter family are buoyed up by your support and your love at this saddest of times.

As Tom's body entered the chapel, you heard 'He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother' (The Hollies). Tom's brother John would have been one of those bearing the coffin. Sadly, he isn't well enough to attend but is watching in Wallsend. All three songs included in the ceremony (the other two being 'Dance with my father' by Luther Vandross and 'Endless love' by Lionel Richie and Diana Ross), along with the two readings you will hear, were chosen by Tom's family because of their special resonance, and as a last act of love for the man they have lost.

Thomas Hunter, born on 9th September 1945, and known always to his mother (and other people's mothers) as 'Thomas', but to others as Tommy, Tom, or 'Bonnie Lad', died on 22nd June at the age of 74. His death has left a gaping hole in the lives of so many. The last few weeks have been heart-breaking for his family – unable to see him in hospital; unable to be by his side in his last days; unable to say goodbye and to take solace from that oh-so-precious human contact. Only Chris was allowed to see him at all, and that was only at the very end. All this compounded their distress then, and it compounds their grief now. There have been many tears.

The writer Washington Irving said, 'There is a sacredness in tears. They are the messengers of overwhelming grief, and of unspeakable love.' So true, yet there is also a sacredness in laughter. And there is healing in laughter too. Chris says, 'We laughed through life', and now they laugh through the tears as they talk about all the great times they had together. They laugh with joy for having known such a kind, fearless, warm and generous man. And I hope you will laugh too, for that is the best possible way to celebrate and to honour him.

He was a loveable character, a bit of a rogue, who led a full, varied and fulfilling life. One of the few things he didn't get round to doing was learning to tap dance! He saw the world; he made friends wherever he went. He would talk to anybody – and do anything for anybody – and he loved his pigeons. He could make a joke of anything and loved stringing people along – though the bit about having a Native American ancestor turned out to be true!

As the eldest son of working parents, he had both freedom and responsibility from an early age and got up to all sorts of tricks as a child. As an adult he was no better – his mother-in-law referred to him as 'Peter Pan'. He knew how to look after himself though – he always said he was 'quick' rather than 'strong' – and he believed in getting the first punch in.

He was well-schooled in country ways and could virtually live off the land – even in Potters Bar! Tom and Chris's first holiday to Malta was funded by his sales of rabbit meat and fox furs. They enjoyed that trip so much it almost became a second home, or should I say a third, after their native Northumberland and their adopted Hertfordshire.

When Chris posted on Facebook that Tom had passed away, she received 130 messages from Marsaskala alone. Everyone in the village, across several generations, knew and loved Tom. Many of you, I know, are watching today.

Poem in memory of Tom

*It's sometimes hard to know why some things happen as they do,
For so much joy and happiness was centred around you.
It seems so hard to comprehend that you're no longer here,
But all the happy memories will forever keep you near.
You're thought about with pride with each mention of your name,
Death cannot change a single thing – the love will still remain.*

The Life and Times of Tom Hunter

Chris was christened in the same church in Shiremoor as Tom. They married in the same church, and they went back to it for their golden wedding anniversary. She has known and loved him for over half a century, and, as the guardian of his memory, she has been writing down everything she remembers. It's not possible to include it all today, but she has asked me to present to you, in brief, 'The Life and Times of Tom Hunter':

Tommy Hunter was born 1945 – the oldest of five children. He remained close to his brother John all his life. They rang each other every Sunday – mostly the discussion was football, John supporting Newcastle and Tom Man United. If Newcastle had lost, John was in for some stick. He was the last person to speak to Tom the day before he passed away, they were life-long brothers, but also best friends.

Tommy Hunter was a mischievous child. He always loved sports: he played football for his junior school and for Northumberland county at senior school. He had a natural ability to understand wildlife and an extraordinary instinct to find birds' nests. He shared this interest with his school friend Mick Saunders who wrote a wonderful tribute to him a few years ago, telling of their exploits in the Northumberland countryside. Mick ended by saying, 'to Tom – countryman, family man, gentleman and friend.' This sums Tom up to most people – he was a man's man.

He left school and started a plastering apprenticeship. He enjoyed those years – he travelled to Devon and Somerset plastering new holiday camps.

When he got his indentures, he left plastering and, being from a sea going family, took himself off to sea. He travelled the world with RFA tankers refuelling Royal Navy ships. He particularly enjoyed his time in the far east – Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Philippines. He was in Canada for Expo 67, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and many more countries. Some he liked: some he didn't.

In 1966, he met Chris at a dance in a working man's club. They soon became an item. Tom continued to go to sea until September '67 when he came ashore and they got engaged. They were married in '68, two weeks before their best man and bridesmaid Gordon and Cath Coleman. They remained friends. Gordon sadly passed away, but Cath was with Tom and Chris to celebrate their golden wedding.

Zoe and Lee came along, Tom loved being a dad and made sure they got the best he could give them. He bought a little caravan and their trips to Scotland began – a time enjoyed by all of them.

In the early '70s the work in the North East was very bad, so after another stint at sea then working in Aviemore and St Neots he decided something had to be done – he didn't like being away from home. In 1975 Chris saw an ad in the paper for a plasterer at Wrotham Park Estate. Tom got the job and the family moved to Potters Bar ... a whole new life began. Mick and Judith Saunders travelled with them to help get settled in, four kids, four adults, a dog and a ferret made the journey from Northumberland to Hertfordshire – not many worried about health and safety then.

Weekends and evenings, Tom helped the gamekeeper Jim Grieg. After being a poacher this was something new! He was in his element, out with his ferrets catching rabbits. When Jim left the estate, he took over as gamekeeper, starting the happiest years in his working career – he always said it was more like a hobby than a job and he loved it.

His years at Wrotham Park were happy ones, he was fond of the Byng family. He watched the children grow up, got them out of a few scrapes ... which we won't go into. Then along came the next generation, Emily and Oliver Monckton who loved spending time with Tom, and now as adults reminisce about the happy times they had with him. Tom always had a special place in his heart for Mrs Byng – he had huge respect for her. In the last few years he

looked forward to her visits with the field magazine or potted shrimps, when they sat having a good chat and putting the world to rights.

Lee loved going out with his dad, ferreting and on the shoots, accompanied by Alan. At the age of 10, Alan's circumstances changed and he adopted the Hunter family. Both boys spent their childhood hunting and fishing, learning all the time from Tom.

Zoe adored her dad. Tom liked nothing better than going somewhere 'POSH' to eat, and she loved introducing him to fine dining. The first time he went to Simpson's in the Strand he was smitten, wherever he went – Harrods, Rules, Fortnum & Mason – Simpson's remained the favourite – he happily returned many times. Zoe has remained close to her dad always asking his advice, often he said she was a lovely bairn and grew up to be a lovely woman – he was very proud of her.

And then along came Flossie – the light of his life. From the first time he saw her at one hour old he adored her – no-one ever had a grandchild but him. Lauren says she had the best childhood because of him, her memories of grandad will be blackberry picking, pretending to horse race around the garden, the crazy bedtime stories he told, and pigeon racing as Hunter and Granddaughter. She will forever be Flossie the granddaughter he loved with all his heart.

When her children were born his natural affinity with kids carried on, Alfie never happier than spending time with his 'grandad'. He has passed on his love of nature, wildlife and plants to him. Alfie was always proud when Tom went to watch him boxing or swimming. They had four precious years, just Alfie and grandad, before Grace arrived. Now to Dainty Dina – she has spent four short years making him laugh, never knowing what she would say or do next kept him on his toes. Alfie calls Grace Dainty Dina and probably always will. When Alfie and Grace lost their daddy it made Tom even more protective towards them. He loved Ryan like one of his own and was deeply affected by his passing.

When Tommy Hunter made a friend it was long term. He's been friends with Dick Gainford for 43 years. Steve Blake, Rod Newton Alan Beach – all long-term pals. His favourite pastime was sitting in the pub, especially Sunday lunchtime, for many years the Lion then later years the Byng. He started The Lion Onion Club, which ran for 14 years, raising lots of money for local charity. He raced pigeons, and in 2001 formed a syndicate in the Onion Club – each paid £10 to enter one of Tom's birds in a race in Scotland. The pigeon won nearly £25,000, making a lot of people very happy.

Over the years Tom made lots of friends, Gary Fuller being one. Gary became Number 2 son, and was very rarely referred to as Gary, always Number 2. He started off as a labourer, quickly going on to plastering, and under Tom's guidance became a very good plasterer. He was taught by the best.

Tommy Hunter was an adopted uncle to many. The Coleman family, the Pearson-Palmers, the Camilleri family in Malta all thought the world of their uncle Tom. The many friends he made in Malta over the years are all shocked and upset at his sudden passing.

Tom had been ill since Christmas. He didn't let it get him down and continued to get in his greenhouse planting his flowers and veg.

Erica Evans, his respiratory nurse, visited regularly, changing medication and giving him encouragement. On the 23rd April he was quite ill, and Erica came to see him. She became his lifeline and couldn't have treated him better if he'd been one of her family – he was very fond of Erica.

He was admitted into hospital on 4th June and on 5th June he was told he had lung cancer. On the 18th June he went into intensive care. He told the palliative care nurse he wanted all treatment withdrawn, just to be kept comfortable, and on 22nd June he passed away with Chris by his side. He was aware until the end.

For us as a family, life will never be the same – we have lost our anchor. He has had an interesting life, regrets he's had a few, but then again too few to mention.

In the words of Mick Saunders ... to Tom – countryman, family man, gentleman and friend – your like we will never see again.

God bless Bonnie Lad. See you on the other side.

Miss Me But Let Me Go

*When I come to the end of the road
And the sun has set for me
I want no rites in a gloom-filled room
Why cry for a soul set free?*

*Miss me a little – but not too long
And not with your head bowed low
Remember the love that we once shared
Miss me – but let me go*

*For this is a journey that we all must take
And each must go alone.
It's all part of the Master's plan
A step on the road to home*

*When you are lonely and sick of heart
Go to the friends we know
And bury your sorrows in doing good deeds
Miss me but let me go.*