

A celebration of life

William John Davies

07 April 1935 – 06 October 2017

1.00 pm, 20 October 2017, Barry Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Tribute

John was born in Barry on the 7th of April 1935 and grew up in Evelyn Street with his parents, Billy and Dora and his sister Jean who was eight years older. His father, uncle and grandfather were police officers and this is a family tradition that, although it jumped John, has carried on in Helen and soon Hywel.

John was the baby of the family who was spoilt and had the best of everything, the best toys, bikes and his pride and joy was a lovely Hornby trainset. Nicola showed me a photograph of John with his bike; a handsome young boy with a shock of white blond hair, looking happy. He was a popular lad with many friends and was very active, loved all sports played cricket, badminton, table tennis and was a goalkeeper in football. He was also a good student, attending Holton Rd school and later Barry Grammar School. He loved maths and seems to have been liked by his teachers; Morgan has found books he had kept, that were given to him by teachers and bore fond inscriptions from them.

But his world was turned upside down when he was fifteen. His father died suddenly and his mother, who was devastated, died a year later. John always believed she died from a broken heart. John literally lost everything, his parents, the vast amounts of love that they had showered on him, his home and most of his possessions.

He was taken in by friends, Harry and Eva Watson, who lived in Tynewydd Road, with their children Roy and Jean. He found himself in another loving family but his new life was very different, things were stricter than he was used to, he shared a room with Roy and was not the only child and the centre of the adults' attention, but he soon adapted. He undertook a carpentry apprenticeship with Barry Council and played football for Burroughs Rovers. Jean remembers him regularly coming home with his football shirt caked in mud. He and Jean used to walk over to the Knap but didn't start courting until he was twenty and they went to St Helier for the day, to see the 1955 "The Battle of The Flowers."

Having finished his apprenticeship John signed up for his National Service that same year and joined the Royal Air Force. He and Jean were married in 1956, and bought a bungalow in Pencoedtre Road, Jean receiving two guineas a month marriage allowance while he was away. He served most of his two years in Silt in Germany. From the stories he told of his time in uniform he seems to have spent most of his

time playing football for the RAF, visiting tourist destinations in Germany and taking photographs. But he sustained an injury which was to have medical implications for the rest of his life. He broke his little finger while playing in goal, it was not properly set and remained bent for the rest of his life. He enjoyed shoehorning the story into every meeting he had with a doctor from then on, because it was just about the only medical thing that happened to him for most of his life.

Upon his demob in 1957 he went to work as a carpenter at Rendall's in Barry and was always proud of the fact that he had helped build the Colcot estate and put the wooden boards around the edge of the Knap Lake. Mike was born in 1958 and in 1961 they moved to Dock View Road where Helen and Julian came along over the next four years. Helen remembers that his only vehicle as they grew up was a works van and so they tended to cycle everywhere and also that he used to take her and Julian to watch Cardiff City. Life was hectic, John worked hard and by this time he had become very involved in the Barry Athletic Club, a relationship that would last for many years.

In the summer John played tennis and in the winter, squash at the club, which was the centre of many of the family activities. They had many friends at the club and it features strongly in the childhood memories of all his children. They would use the club as a base while John played tennis and they would play all over the Island, the Old Harbour and of course, they too played tennis. Helen remembers watching John play and remarked that he was a very good player. She also remembers that he used to wear very short, shorts, that were a bit of a worry, and, of course, a great source of potential embarrassment to his children.

John had two stories that he loved to tell, the bent little finger, and the fact that he had played at Wimbledon. I am told it was rare that on first meeting with someone he wouldn't manage to get his Wimbledon adventure into the conversation within the first ten minutes. The flowers today are in the Wimbledon colours to acknowledge his love of tennis, his achievements and dedication to Barry Athletic Club. He won many competitions, his name can be seen in the club on trophies and on the wall, he was club champion on four occasions, a first team member for fifty years and was the first person to be awarded "life membership" for his service to the club. But that was all to come.

All our lives are complicated and often relationships the most complex part of them. Jean and John split up and both remarried. Not an unusual story in itself, but what is unusual, is the closeness that remains within that wider extended family. John married Hazel, Nicola was born five years later and Kat three years after that. By that time Jean and Christie had married and Louise had been born. John and Hazel

remained close friends with Jean and Christie, and as their families grew, their children grew together, doing many things as a family, such as parties and sleeping over at each other's homes. I have never known Helen to differentiate between her brothers and sisters in the way she talks about them. When we all got together to chat about today their closeness was obvious and this is a great credit to all their parents.

In his early thirties John changed his career, while working at Miles Bristol in Cardiff, he retrained as a Chartered Quantity Surveyor and was involved in some very big projects. He was proud of the fact that he had calculated all the materials needed to build the Second Severn Crossing and the Millennium Stadium. This obviously required a great attention to detail, which was not just confined to his work.

John was a perfectionist, luckily, he was also very fit and healthy with a phenomenal tolerance for pain. Because while none of his daughters could remember him ever complaining about feeling unwell or being in pain, he did complain about most other things. Morgan told me that when you cut the lawn for him or power washed his drive, he would come out, look at it, sigh, and point out the bits you'd missed. He taught his children the correct way of packing a supermarket trolley and bagging the shopping up afterwards. And of course, it wasn't just any supermarket trolley it was a Marks and Spencer supermarket trolley. Giving him a lift was like have a driving instructor and satnav next to you telling you why you weren't driving properly or taking the best route.

He was very handy around the house and did most things himself when he was younger, even building the extension to Willow Crescent himself, but as he got older, whenever he had workman in the house, he would follow them around and direct them to make sure they did the job, how he would have done it himself. As you can imagine his garden was also close to perfection. He loved gardening, had a greenhouse and grew fruit and veg as well as his pristine lawn. Children playing in Willow Crescent were well aware that it was only really safe for Nicola or Kat to very carefully tiptoe across the grass to retrieve a ball.

The family had many friends in Willow Crescent, which was quite a close community, and he was always looking out for them, wanting to know who was driving down the street and what was going on. OK he was a bit nose. But with their neighbours and tennis friends they had a busy social life. John loved to entertain and especially enjoyed barbecuing. He and Hazel enjoyed cruising, going on many with friends and neighbours over the years and with Kat and Morgan on one occasion.

John was generous, he was always there for, and would do anything for his children and grandchildren. He was also fortunate to have three opportunities to be a father. Firstly, as a young father with Mike, Helen and Julian, then a more mature father with Nicola and Kat. Morgan was his third opportunity to bring up a child and she became his lifeline, when for the second time in his life he lost two loved ones a year apart.

Hazel died in 2003, when Morgan was five and a year later Julian was killed in Iraq. Morgan was John's reason to go on, he was her surrogate dad, rather than her grandfather. He took her to school and picked her up every day until she was eighteen. He took on many of Hazel's roles for the girls, always cooking Sunday Dinner.

But he wasn't just close to Morgan. John was very good with children and all his ten grandchildren were special to him even though they were spread across the UK and world. In a family where the word "half" was not used when talking about brothers and sisters, the word "step" had no meaning to him and he looked forward to seeing all of them when they visited. Nicola regularly travelled from Birmingham with her family to visit.

After Hazel's death, his friend Nigel and he became company for each other and they spent most evenings together, ate at each other's house, went on holidays and socialised together. John was still playing tennis regularly and only stopped when he had a fall, six years ago aged seventy-six. He fell and hit his head on rocks and injured his shoulder. Kat saved his life and not happy with the initial diagnosis pushed the doctors until they did a scan and discovered that he had suffered a bleed on the brain. Since that time Kat became John's primary carer and took the lion's share of the responsibility for him. He was very proud of her training to be a nurse.

Nigel died three years ago and this hit John quite hard and he didn't really socialise much after that. But he still had interests. Firstly, his family, enjoying red wine and cigars and doing his weekly shop in Marks and Spencer, where by this time Helen, Kat and Morgan had all worked. But it was Morgan who achieved the dream, she got him an M&S family discount card.

John was a lovely man, a charmer; a softly spoken man, able to stand his ground while never raising his voice and a man still able to surprise his family with new tales of his life, even when in his hospital bed a few weeks ago. I'll finish my tribute to him with the last story he told his family.

Once many years ago, before breathalysers, he had been playing tennis in Dinas Powys and after a good drink drove home through the lanes. Half way home he