

A celebration of life

Christopher John Roberts

6th January 1963 – 9th August 2021

11am – 12pm, 26th August 2021, New Southgate Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Christopher Roberts was born in Coventry to Rita and John on 6th January 1963, a younger brother to Dave. He was always known as Chris – except when his mum was being stern; or if you were on the Liverpoolian side, in which case it was probably Robbo; or if you were one of his college friends who called him ‘Dad’ – or even ‘Mr Sensible’ – because he would be the one who made sure you got home safely after a night of excess.

Rita remembers him as being honest, caring and happy, and as boys, he and Dave were free to roam, riding their bikes and making their own entertainment. But there the old stereotype ends – Rita remembers him crying once when a little boy was severely punished at school. And his friends included lots of girls because he was nice to them, though doubtless his strawberry-blond locks and angelic good looks helped. Rita says he inherited those from his dad’s side of the family! He was usually overlooked when a teacher was surveying the class looking for the perpetrator of some misdemeanour, but since he wasn’t particularly naughty anyway, it hardly mattered.

Chris’s brother Dave has known him since birth, so let’s start the story with him.

Dave Roberts

Growing up in Mantilla drive a half finished estate we had Mud heaps, grass fields and the pair of us had adventures, football then a play with the dog and a wrestling match.

We always had pets ... hamsters then baby hamsters, guinea pigs then baby guinea pigs and Kim the west highland terrier.

As the estate developed we had lots of other kids arrive and there nightly games of football on the local grass patch ... wonderful times.

Chris had a few early escapes ... falling down an open man hole into water and falling off a boat on the broads.

After that we both headed off to different schools, myself to the local and then Bablake and Chris to King Henry V111 junior and senior.

I guess growing up we both felt the pressure of a supportive but expectant father.

With neither of us really excelling at school as our hearts were out on the sports fields, with Chris definitely being the more talented sportsman ...

Chris went off to college and then to work experience in London and I to an apprenticeship.

I think we both found our way more in later life

Best Man’s speech

And I guess this sums Chris up ...

Although now miles apart I was getting married at 27 and I had a problem ... who to do the Best Man’s speech. I’d been to several of my mates weddings and the local lads I hung out with had given speeches ... which at that age were frankly disasters, so I gave Chris a job that wasn’t really his responsibility ... and I felt guilty ... really guilty, but true to Chris’s nature he took on the task and did a great job ... and that sums Chris up ... he was always reliable understated, but always reliable.

After several relationships the family were introduced to Joan ... Chris was good looking lad, outgoing but generally mild mannered.

This girl was the polar opposite, outspoken, political, brash and a whirlwind of unpredictability and with what looked like a Margaret Thatcher haircut ... but the relationship worked... it really worked.

We all grew to know and love and welcome a new character to the family and Chris seemed to thrive and children arrived, which was great, both our sets of our children being extremely close ...

I'm eternally grateful that Chris's family were always there at family events and Christmas was supported with visits to Coventry and my mums house was always a happy hub for the whole family ...

It's seems so unfair that someone so deserving was deprived of a happy healthy retirement ... and I regret not having that all important all telling big conversation. I'll miss meeting up for Coventry Cities infrequent big games but will always cherish the many happy memories

...

Love you Chris XX

As Dave said, Chris was very good at sport, and this determined his choice of school. And this is where he met his two most longstanding friends – Steve and Steve. Chris generally left it up to them to initiate ideas for jaunts (just as he did Joan later in life!) – and he sometimes, as Steve Inns says, needed a rocket up the proverbial. But once he got going there was no stopping him. Indeed there was a fearlessness about him – recklessness even – that most couldn't match, whether it was hurtling down ski slopes or rushing headlong down mountains on his bike – after all, who needs brakes?

But he rarely got injured – something to do with that natural coordination and spatial awareness that made him so good at sport – any sport. The list is as long as your arm – present him with a ball of any size or shape and a pair of boots, or a racket, or a snooker cue, and off he went. When Marnie and Ruby started learning to ice skate Chris just got himself a pair of skates and joined them on the rink.

His mates had noted this very early on. He had many friends throughout his life but had a true bond with the two Steves, a friendship lasting over 50 years which started at King Henry VIII school. Their friendship covered some of the many different chapters in Chris's life:

Chapter 1, Junior school, where it soon became apparent that Chris was a gifted sportsman, where he stood out not only for his prolific goal scoring ability, but also for his white Georgie Best football boots.

Chapter 2, Senior school, where Chris was passionate about rugby – being in the highly successful school team – and where he made long-lasting friendships with Adrian Warner and Nick Newbold, two fellow first team players who he also joined to watch games up until recently. Chris continued on after school to play rugby for Walsall college where he completed his Visual Communications degree and became close friends with Johnny 'A', Ian and Wendy and Bernie.

Chapter 3, The Rocket, the local school pub, where Chris had his first under-age beer and met his school friends, Steve and Steve, Adrian and Nick, plus Dave Cooper, Nick Pattison, Ivor Matthews and Roy Shaw. Everyone suited and bootied to look older, but Chris, with his youthful baby face, looking about 12 years old.

Chris had the ability to make a pint last an eternity, his friends often saying that it would evaporate quicker than he could drink it, but he would be too busy telling one of his legendary, lengthy, but witty stories, something Chris was well known for throughout his life. His quick wit was always at the forefront of any conversation.

And, as Dave Cooper remarked, 'He was a master of observational humour'.

The nights in the Rocket would end with Steve Thrift trying to fit everyone into his furlined Hillman Imp in an attempt to get everyone home.

Chapter 4, Greek Holidays: *the 'infamous' boys' holidays in Greece with Nick, Ivor, Roy and the two Steves, along with other reprobates from Henry's, which started in Chris's late teens. Chris turned brown at the mere sight of the sun while his friends turned a nice shade of lobster.*

Chris was always considered the 'cute one' of the group and would often have girls walking up to him to ask him out, while his friends stood around open mouthed and jealously saying, 'well you haven't heard one of his stories yet'. But they were always too late as the girls had already fallen for his good looks, winning smile and witty humour.

Chris didn't shine academically at school, but excelled at the subject that most mattered: art. Rita talks of how he painted the whole of one wall in his bedroom with black gloss paint – it acted as a sort of wipe-clean canvas for watercolours. He was already deeply into photography, and had even converted the cellar at home into a darkroom. By the time he left to go to art school and later study for his degree, he had a clear idea of what fired him, and it wasn't just about spending time behind a camera, it was about using photography and video to communicate.

At college he made more friends and attracted more girls. One of them, Anne-Marie, says, 'I was determined to infiltrate Chris's gang because they all looked so cool and "Cred". We had code words and silly words to describe events, people and places.

Chris was often called "Dish" being dark-skinned, sporty and handsome.'

The two Steves take up the story with:

Chapter 5, London: *after college Chris moved down to London into his bachelor flat, all chrome and black leather, along with his trusty electric guitar and amplifier, something he loved to play.*

Chris even wrote and performed a song at his wedding reception held in Liverpool entitled 'Never Marry a Scouser' ... because they will always steal your heart.

The White Horse Pub, off Carnaby Street, replaced The Rocket and became the new meeting point for Chris and his friends and where Chris met new friends, Tim, Lee,

Phil and Jane, and then through clubbing nights Mandy, Caroline, and of course his special friend Joan who later became Chris's wife even after we warned her about his stories.

After graduating in 1986 and doing his placement in London, Chris started to get work there and stayed, buying his first flat in Stoke Newington. He was employed by Imperial College for seven years and also worked freelance, honing his skills and developing his knowledge and networks. Then, in 2008, he started his own business, Knuckle TV.

Inevitably, through work, he had contact from time to time with high-profile people such as Stephen Hawking or Sir Ranulph Fiennes, but he was never starstruck, indeed one of his many likeable traits was that he dealt with everyone in the same way. He had no side, no conceits. He's described as having 'a real knack for building rapport with anyone and everyone, from the CEO to the security guard – he could talk to them all, and they would all light up in his company.' Others describe his 'calm professionalism and easy manner'; his 'tactical use of a well-placed anecdote was a masterclass in restoring calm and levity to stressful situations'.

There was no doubt he could produce the goods. As another Chris – a collaborator turned-friend – said, ‘He was probably the best video maker I’ve worked with. That was not the reason Chris did so much work for us though – quite simply, he was a nice guy – funny, polite, trustworthy and just great to be with. So the fact he was damn good at what he did was a bonus’.

Chris Gosling goes on to describe a time when they met up for a job in Athens.

We were having dinner at a local taverna when Chris [joined] us ... It was great to see him again. The fact he was dressed in a black hoodie saying ‘I Love Athens’ on the back and a pair of ill-fitting Bermuda shorts was a little strange but, as Chris didn’t volunteer a reason for the choice of attire, it felt impolite to ask why – and we had loads to catch up on.

We started work next day with a good breakfast ... He was dressed again in black and Bermuda and again no one asked the reason why. We started work. Chris’s job for the first day was to interview some of our ‘key opinion leaders’. For me, the fact that Chris could interview and film some of the top, world-renowned scientists and clinicians whilst dressed in what was essentially beach wear, without anyone thinking this was anything out of the ordinary, puts Chris in a category all of his own. Chris had style – sometimes a bit weird but everyone loved it.

The reason for his odd clothing choice was simple, the airline had lost his bag and this was what he’d been able to pick up in the airport on the way over to the hotel. Chris never once complained or moaned, it seemed to me that he viewed the loss of all his clothes as a minor distraction. The most important item, his camera, had been on the seat right beside him, so all was good. To my knowledge, Chris never did get his clothes back and he spent the rest of the week dressed in his now famous attire.

Chris had a healthy attitude to work. As well as having fun while he was there, he knew when to stop, and when he had children he was determined not to be one of those dads that is never home.

As the Steves said, Chris and Joan met in a club. They had come across each other a couple of times before, but once they started talking, that was it. It helped that he was rather gorgeous looking but not the slightest bit vain with it!

As Mandy says: ‘Chris came into our Joanie’s life during a time of dancing, drinking and a whole lot of fun. [Chris] brought fun and laughter but also calm and solidity. One of my highlights has to be the Mr Blobby impression that he would leave the room to practise before always delivering perfectly’.

Chris had an eclectic musical taste straddling all sorts of bands, preferably alternative, mainly from the late 70s and 80s. He played both air and real guitar, the latter well enough to go busking with a female singer at one point in his youth and later, after he took up the ukulele, he accompanied Joan at the fortnightly McAleavy Family gatherings during lockdown. If you’re quick, you’ll catch a snippet of them performing ‘It must be Love’ in Dave Chapman’s video later – not something they decided to repeat. But he not only had a vast knowledge, he had a drum kit and guitar in his office at work and wrote music himself. Although his musical tastes didn’t always match that of his family, it was integral to some wonderful shared experiences – Joan, Marnie and Ruby remember a holiday when they were driving through Yosemite National Park playing Bohemian Rhapsody at full blast with the windows wide open – and only the coyotes to hear!

Chris was always up for an adventure, and when the girls were old enough, he took them to Dads Camp. The great thing about those, apart from going to lovely locations on the coast or in forests, was that THERE WERE NO RULES! – and the mums didn’t know this. Chris also went off on separate walking and climbing tours with different groups of people, including his annual walks with Richard and Graham in Wales.

He also did climbs up Mount Kinabalu in Borneo in the rain, and Stromboli at night – all the better to enjoy the lava flows. He always bought himself high-end equipment, and made sure Marnie and Ruby also had the most up-to-date phones. He had a knack for present-buying – whether it was a full set of Le Creuset kitchenware or a nice piece of jewellery, it demonstrated his thoughtfulness and sense of what suited people.

Since Chris and Joan both worked full-time they juggled things so that they could be at home with the girls as they were growing up. Cooking the evening meal fell mostly to Joan, although Chris was well capable of cooking, and if he was on his own he might have a steak with all the trimmings. Joan and the girls remember how he would come home ravenous, after a day of hardly eating at work. It was constant eating then on from about 7.00 – after the meal they would find him making himself sandwiches or a grabbing a bowl of cereal. And he was the King of Snacking – they watched in amazement as a whole large pack of crisps would go down in one go.

One of the other things he liked to do when at home was a bit of DIY, making runs for Marnie and Ruby's gerbils, and a terrarium for the tortoise. He was always happy to go and give neighbours a hand too. He could usually find a few bits and pieces in his shed and work out what to do if they were stuck.

And he liked his small moments of calm – he was often to be seen, when he put his bike in the shed on returning from the office, taking five minutes just watching the fish in the pond.

Frans Berkhout

It is hard to say something about Chris without first acknowledging the cruelty of how his life came to an end. All our lives are created out of happenstance and chance, but usually apparently random events and experiences are explicable in some way. We can tell a story about them; they come to make sense to us. There is something utterly inexplicable about CJD and its relentless effects, and I think it haunts each of us as we think of Chris and his last days. He was taken away from us too early and we regret this very deeply.

Trying to say something about Chris is complicated in another way as well. We are all many things, and this was true of Chris as well. Chris' essence – his 'Chrisness' – had many aspects which are slightly elusive when you try and write them down. He was very practical and concrete and realistic, with a suspicion of fancy ideas and pretensions. But he was also a creative person, curious and entrepreneurial. Always making something new, always moving on to the next thing. He was very fixed and stubborn. And open and flexible. He was someone who loved company and was a great companion to others, but he was also someone who liked to be by himself, at work or in a wilderness.

He was both there with us but also in his own thoughts, separated, at one remove. I think this quality of being real to people, in the moment, but also slightly out-of-reach, mysterious perhaps, is what endeared him to us. You knew you were comfortable in his company, but you also knew there was a part of Chris which was withheld, separated, reserved.

I think it was this quality of being with people, of standing close to them and with them, while also remaining separate from them that enabled Chris to be such a great observer of life and people, in his work and when he was with his friends and family. He was the man behind the camera, but the act of observation was never intrusive or coloured in any way.

To observe is to have a perspective. You need to stand somewhere to see something. Chris had a perspective, but it was a perspective that somehow stood side-by-side with the person or thing he was observing. Chris was interested in people and accepted them as they were, even as he observed them. This quality also lies at the heart of his gentle observational humour, his quips about people and situations, hard to repeat now but a backbeat to all our time spent with him. Always present, always making jokes. Revealing things about people but still being at their side; revealing his own humanity as he did so.

This ability to stand with people, to imagine things from their perspective is at the root of Chris' essential kindness. Since his death, so many people have written and spoken about acts of simple kindness which Chris had shown to them over the years: whether this was helping someone prepare a film portfolio for a job application or teaching them how to play pool.

Standing apart while being with people also, perhaps, explains some of Chris' eccentricities. Although he was modest and measured in his tastes and mores, there were also some oddities. He was a great collector of gear and gadgets. Whenever he came to visit us in Amsterdam, he would take himself off to Carl Denig, a smart outdoor sports shop, and come back with another expensive jacket. But in the annual walking tour of the Old Aunts, crossing the Lake District, the Black Forest or the Dolomites, he would always turn up wearing the same pair of threadbare shorts and raggedy sports short. He had an attachment to things and people, always expressed in his own way. Chris was also sometimes quite outrageous, but gently so. He was utterly fearless zooming down a mountain side on a bike and phlegmatic when he fell off.

One Christmas we stayed near the Black Mountains in Herefordshire, and in freezing weather a group of us walked up a peak called the Black Hill. At the top was a frozen pond. As the rest of us huddled against the wind talking about the view, Chris stripped naked and bare-foot skated across the pond. It's a moment of sublime hilarity that has stayed with me.

I want to end by bearing witness to the central fact of Chris' life: his love of Joan and his daughters, Marnie and Ruby. In Joan he found a soulmate: someone who shared his ideas of life; who loved to have fun; and laughed at his jokes. In our mind's eye they will always be a glamorous couple with a sparkle about them, always bringing good cheer and fun where they go. Chris and Joan seemed to complete each other, a bond that was strengthened by their beautiful daughters.

We can bring strength to Joan, Marnie and Ruby, and to each other, by preserving a strong memory of Chris as he really was: a patient, kind and funny man, at ease in the world, bringing companionship wherever he went, standing close to us while protecting his essential mystery.

Marnie and Ruby: Our Dad

*Usually when you hear the expression one in a million you think of good fortune, or good luck
Well, our dad was one in a million the worst kind of way,
Dying from a disease that was so rare, heart-breaking and abrupt
But dad was never the overly emotional type,
So we doubt he'd want us to go on about how much we love him, miss him, or how he was the
greatest dad around,
Instead, we'll share some things that we carry with us and will remember him by,
Some things that he might like to hear now*

*For most people, the first thing that comes to mind when thinking of dad would be his quick-witted humour,
He had a knack for making a joke out of anything whether it was appropriate or not,
Never failing to crack a few smiles or laughs when he entered a room,
There was always a great atmosphere when he was about*

*Dad would thrive in any environment he was in,
His observational jokes were well timed and subtle
He had a talent for being the entertainer,
Whilst never needing to be the centre of attention*

*Or perhaps people might think of his relaxed presence,
I could probably count on one hand the number of times he ever raised his voice at us,
It took a lot for him to lose his rag,
And going off old family videos, we were a lively pair who definitely would have tested his
patience*

*But there are sides to dad that others may not have seen,
His creativity spun beyond his profession of video production,
He was also great at art and loved making music,
We'd occasionally receive clips on a Friday from 'Rockin Robbo' containing his latest musical
creation*

*Dad was always up for a chat about any kind of topic,
He had a certain aptitude for rambling,
He could go on for days about any point of discussion,
Whilst we would giggle to mum and intermittently tune in*

*Yet what he dished out he would always return,
As he was one of the best listeners we knew,
From political rants to gossiping about the latest dramas in school,
He'd be all ears to hear us ramble on too*

*You might not know about how he hated the word proud,
It really seemed to irk both him and mum,
So don't go saying that he'd be proud of us,
Because we've been subjected to one or two lectures on how overused the word has become*

*He devoted a lot of his time to entertain our many hobbies over the years,
Short-lived or not he would always indulge us,
From building enclosures for our pets to being a model for special effects makeup,
He would never lose interest in facilitating our newest phases*

*He was always up for an adventure,
And would throw himself into anything,
From jungle trekking, to skiing
And joining us every weekend to go ice skating*

*He went against the grain to go to art school,
To seek a career that he truly enjoyed,
This attitude led to the creation of business built from scratch,
Which became successful and left him fulfilled*

*Dad encouraged us to be inquisitive,
Sparking many debates around the dinner table,
Now I have a degree in politics and ruby is the founder of her school's feminist society,
We owe this partly to his curious and discursive nature
He always seemed to have an answer for most questions we had to ask,
And would respond to any problem with calmness and rationality,
No matter the situation he'd have a solution,
Which he would deliver along with hints of mockery*

*All musing aside,
He would always support us in whatever we did,
Capturing every moment on camera,
So that we'd have everlasting memories of our time with him*

*It's still hard to understand,
That dad won't be around,
From graduating uni,
To buying our first house*

*All the advice he had to give,
And all the time he had to share,
We never imagined we'd have to grow up without him being there*

*So you see it's hard to accept the odds of one in a million,
When dad truly was one of the best,
But he will be widely remembered in a positive light by those who knew him,
And by us, who had a dad we will never forget.*