

A celebration of life George Francis Clive Veness

4 September 1947– 20 June 2021

11.30 am, Stanhope, Winchelsea Beach, East Sussex

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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So let's think about George. As Carmen said, "It's almost endless what could be said about George as he was such a presence – productive, intelligent, inquisitive, driven, always busy but still plenty of time for others." So are you sitting comfortably?

George, who was known as Clive as a young man, was born in Tunbridge Wells, the son of Jack and Olive Veness, and brother of Sheila. In later years, when Sheila was putting together a book of memories for her grandchild Jasmine, she filled in questions about her and her brother:

Who was the best behaved? went the question. Sheila, went the answer. Who was the naughtiest? George! The picture on your Order of Ceremony shows George with his nanny dog, an English bull terrier.

We'll start with Pauline Harran telling us about George as a young man.

George Veness breezed chuckling into my life in a shared Suffolk cottage in 1976. A highly imaginative engineer studying music at Colchester, he'd arrive with armfuls of scavenged firewood & would elbow in one of the harpsichords he had made, then sit down to bounce sparkling staccatos of revered & sacred Bach off the firelit walls, or hammer forth farcical & cackling recitals of Scarlatti & other baroque delights. One winter night he brought home an accidental & exquisite hare from the roadside which we later jugged & relished. In the spring he'd dig up the Suffolk clay for his cabbages. I was paraging Suffolk houses then with George's warm encouragement.

By the late 70s he had moved & was in love with Kathryn, a beautiful musician with a cloak of shimmering brown satin hair. They adored one another & much inspired, began brewing wonderful wines including one of birch-sap which tasted like the Russian winter & which could later on have made them rich. Their tiny Colchester flat was bursting with the gusto of jolly songsters from the local choirs practising delectable period music. Whenever the local Shakespearean productions needed contemporary music, George would arrive to perform with a picturesque entourage of sackbut & hurdy-gurdy players & specialist knowledge of 16th century compositions.

The couple's wedding was to take place at St. Albans Cathedral, where the choir were to sing splendid anthems. Afterwards a procession of restored vintage vehicles was to lead them back. The drivers, top-hatted & in period costumes would follow them after the service to Bricket Wood where a friend had lent the bride & groom her large splendid parterred garden. George & Kathryn would cater themselves & helped by friends, put up the marquees & prepare a sit-down meal. Two nights before, Kathryn loaded her car with their home-made sparkling wine & hundreds of glasses & drove to her parents' home to borrow the money for the expenses.

As she was driving home, the car crashed into a ditch, all the wine & glasses shot over her head through the windscreen & Kathryn was not found for two hours. At last, dragged out of the wreck, she came home from hospital & decided to go ahead with the wedding. On the day as people arrived, George's adorable father Ruby, breeder of prize geraniums, was sticking squares of cheese on sticks into his enormous prize turnip centrepiece. Guests arrived to find that with friends' help the whispered crisis had vanished & the wedding, a fete champetre in an Agincourt setting, was declared the most beautiful that people had ever been to. Kathryn, in an idyllically mesmerised state, sat in the string quartet & played beside the cellist. Bearded George smiled thankfully through the day in his velvet coat & the pair drove delightedly off that evening in their classic automobile wearing splendid 1920s costumes.

Very sadly, however, four years later, they separated, but George determined to carry on with his music-making and collection of period instruments, harpsichords, pianos & pianolas. His developing business making music stands brought him into contact with many enthusiasts in Europe, where he made many friends. George later became very ill with spondylitis, looking very wizened, but a miracle of healing inspiration happened to him & he recovered almost completely to become the genial, wryly witty & enchanting friend, reliving the jazz age through 1920s dances, the Charleston & Black Bottom & mastering the intricacies of jitterbug & researching obscurely fascinating music & dance steps & performing brilliantly.

His dance-floor upstairs in his house has been the setting for so many tantalising shows of dancing skill & given enormous pleasure to many friends. His charming recitals, last time of Bach's Goldberg Variations, have been a delight & his generously kind & eccentric charm always brought interesting people together.

Of late, though ill, he has continued with Carmen's wonderful help, to keep the garden going with its forest of tomatoes packed into the greenhouses & every kind of vegetable & herb growing in fructuous, aromatic, orderly splendour.

I can't imagine that he has gone.. as even though I was not able to take care of him at the end, George will always be a much-treasured, greatly loved & oft-remembered part of me. I am honoured to have been fortunate enough to have known him.

George was a Shakespeare lover, so the structure of the next part of the ceremony is based on a quote:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,*

Well, I've counted at least 14 parts that George played, and we're going to hear a bit about them all.

The engineer – his first degree – well, he didn't do that for very long, once he discovered the joys of music and Austin Sevens. So we won't go into more detail about that.

The Collector – Most notably, his collection of instruments known as The Stanhope Collection. Mike Boyd will now talk to us about, among other things, about how George's piano collection was started.

George was a gifted and accomplished keyboard-player. He entered competitions in Tunbridge Wells and elsewhere as a youngster, and I believe that he did very well.

He was able to do something as a young man that it is now impossible to do, that is to work in an English piano Factory. The company was George Rogers Ltd, of Tottenham. Like me, George greatly deplored the demise of the British piano industry, and he was proud to have worked in it.

His first wage packet enabled him to buy himself a piano. Not just any old piano, but a Weber upright Pianola which he bought from Ernest Chandler's shop in Rye - the premises that I now own. If he told me how much he paid, I'm afraid that I can't remember. George kept the Weber, and it is still in the Stanhope Collection.

Although George was a good pianist and could play most styles of music from Baroque to Scott Joplin, he had a fascination for the Pianola, and that is how I came to meet him over thirty years ago. He'd heard that I restored them for a living, and asked me to restore the Weber, which I duly did. He wanted to acquire another for the Stanhope Collection, and I had the Gaveau Ampico grand that he subsequently bought from me. It wasn't a straightforward sale, though. George had a 1932 Morris Family-8 saloon car in the garage, and I took that in part-payment.

George joined the Player Piano Group of Great Britain at my suggestion, and hosted two or three social meetings at Stanhope over the years which were a great success.

George's physical problems - including a serious injury to a finger - never prevented him from playing the piano, harpsichord or any other keyboard, nor from doing any of the many other activities that he managed to find the time to do.

He was a witty, clever, gifted and sometimes infuriating individual. I will greatly miss those phone calls that he often ended abruptly without as much as a good-bye. Come to that, I will greatly miss him in so many ways.

Marcus Weeks will now talk to us about George, humour and friendship

I don't remember exactly when I met G, but it was shortly after I had qualified as a piano tuner and restorer in the 1980s. He asked me to come over to tune (I think) one of his big old beasts, a player piano. What greeted me on arriving at Stanhope was apparent chaos — bits of piano, harpsichord etc — but with an underlying method to its madness. I immediately felt at home, with the jumble of instruments, tools and mechanical bits and pieces, and with George. Tea ensued, and we got to chatting.

Over the years, we discovered many things in common, including most importantly a sense of humour.

At some stage, he asked my help in setting up the collection as a charity, and I became one of its trustees, as well as curator, and was continually surprised by his wealth of knowledge of historical instruments, and his skill in learning about how to get them working again — he was very much of the opinion that they should be restored to be played, not looked at, and that they should be as far as possible restored to how the maker intended, not as museum pieces with all original parts. He also realised that music from different periods and even different places sounded best on the instruments of that time/place, and demonstrated it expertly by playing in a multitude of styles and genres — expertly — to anybody who cared to listen.

What he referred to as his “bloody ank spond”, the dreadful arthritic condition he suffered from for so long, was a constant nuisance — but he wasn’t going to let it get in the way of what he wanted to achieve, especially when it came to his beloved collection. When I was diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis and for some years was forced to give my piano work, he was a great support — and admitted that there were often times when it got him down big time. And so, over the years as we both grew more ancient and decrepit, we had yet another thing in common.

I am sorry that during the pandemic we were reduced to phone conversations, not the usual cups of tea and wanders round the garden. He had just built a beehive before lockdown, hoping that I could supply him with some bees for the coming summer. I’m sorry that never happened, as I’m sure he would have loved them.

I shall miss him

The musician – But of course he didn’t just collect those instruments to look at, the played them, and he played any other keyboard he could get his hands on, be in the grand piano at Halsway when everyone else was exhausted after a long day’s dancing, or the collection at Finchcocks on their open weekends.

And then, of course, **The dancer** - his friend Teresa Teal will now talk to us about George the dancer

I met George over 25 years ago at Lindy Hop classes in the village hall at Stone in Oxney run by Gypsy John and his teaching partners Carole or Sharon or Karen. Later the classes moved to the church hall in Hastings. There was a dedicated and stalwart group of us that attended every week, rain or shine. Myself, Jane, Phil White, Terry Hulph, big George, Sally, Jim, Paul and Tina, Wendy and Leslie, Dave and Zena, Elaine and Derek. I may have missed a few. George was determined to overcome some of his physical problems to enjoy dancing but he had to pace himself. He loved the big band swing music and dancing to it. However George was fussy about what music he liked and how loud it was. There were some dances where he left early because he wasn’t enjoying the music, it was often too loud for him. As our dancing improved, we went farther afield, often to London to Simon Selman or Julie Oram’s classes and to the Snow Ball. Julie taught some classes at the White Rock Theatre which we all enjoyed. George went to many dances and especially enjoyed the London War Rooms and Penshurst Place where he wore his amazing blazer. He was always very dapper and well turned out.

As we got to know George better, we realised he was a very talented musician who enjoyed a wide variety of music from classical, baroque, swing and early music which he played in ensembles. He collected and restored many instruments; pianos, spinets, clavichords, virginals, flutes, recorders, dulcimers, hurdy gurdy, assorted ethnic rhythm instruments. He loved player pianos and had a large collection of piano rolls at home. He was a skilled craftsman who even made his own harpsichord from scratch. He made and sold music stands and restored Brian’s English hammer dulcimer to a high standard.

One of my favourite memories of George is in 2007 when he piped Brian and I into our wedding reception at the White Rock theatre with his hurdy gurdy. It was a unique moment and a highlight of our wedding. Later we all enjoyed listening to and dancing to the big band.

George loved to throw a party with food, music and dancing. Catering was sometimes chaotic but always worked out in the end. He often brought back delicacies from his trips to France. There was always a feeling of spontaneity with mixtures of musicians, singers, dancers, artists, writers and poets in a big melting pot. There was never any stuffiness, he seemed to have a special skill in bringing different people together. We always had such a good time. George was so keen to dance he installed a proper dance floor at home where Jane often went for practice sessions. They won a dance competition with their own routine to 'Begin the Beguine'. He also loved the Lambeth Walk and taught us the steps.

Phil remembers a momentous occasion where George ceremoniously ejected a dilapidated piano through the large first floor window of his home.

Jane was brought up with piano music, she loved to hear George play and was enthralled by the pianolas. She took her elderly Mum to visit him and look at his amazing instruments.

Lockdown was the complete opposite to all he loved, socialising, dancing, and live music.

One Christmas, Jane's daughter played the violin to accompany George on the piano. Plenty of Noel Coward and Ivor Novello songs were sung.

George had a cheeky sense of humour and gave Jane and Phil a book called 'Old Git Wit.'

George loved Jane's stew and dumplings and she always took him some whenever she made it. George loved his cats and went to the cat sanctuary a few times with Jane. He also loved sheep and got 2 lambs as pets for Jane's garden, showing her how to bottle feed them.

*We were lucky enough to see George in the care homes this year and although he was very frail, he still had his sense of humour. Jane managed to take him out to her lovely home where Jim and Sally popped in to see him. They sat in the conservatory with the doors open. George said that it was great to be together but why are the f***ing doors open.*

We will miss George so much. His joy of life was so positive and comforting. So grateful for the privilege of his loyal friendship in our lives.

And now Kerry will talk to us, also about George and dancing

And I will talk about George's Chapeloise Shoes...

The Chapeloise is a change partner dance, it's great for getting to know new people - lucky me - I met George!!

I'll talk about how Chris and I met George at Les Batons, a French and Breton dance club, how he introduced us to swing dancing and how I introduced him to Halsway Folk Summer School and what an integral and wonderful part he played in the company each year.

The best Chapeloise I've ever had was here at George's 70th birthday party, Chris playing in the middle and us dancers dancing around him at midnight in the moonlight - wonderful and unforgettable!

And there are some lovely messages from George's other dancer friends too. Carole Elsmore said: "Rest in peace my friend, and dance with the angels". Kevin Dempsey said: "What a lovely, humorous, intelligent, sweet man George was. I always looked forward to having a chat with him and having a few little asides during the course of the week." And Carolyn Robson said: "He will be greatly missed. Lovely, loveable man! He has been coming [to Halsway for such a long time. Loved to hear him playing piano and such a repertoire! He will leave a big gap in our Folk Week."

Next, **The swimmer** – George swam in the sea, just a few minutes' walk from here, almost every day, despite his physical problems and eventually his declining health. He'd swim wherever he could. On his last visit to his friends in Carcassone, he wrote to one of his freinds "I've had a couple of swims in the Med, possibly for the last time"

The craftsman – George could make almost anything out of wood, but he will be particularly remembered for his music stands and his clavichords.

Frank Cropper, who eventually took over George's music stand business, will now talk to us

(Frank talked about how they were introduced when he admired one of George's music stands at Finchcocks, and how George helped him to improve his wood-working skills by setting him challenges. He talked about George's many interests, including performing music, singing, ensemble playing, dancing, and Scalextric and of nights in the loft including the one when the piano went out of the window. He also talked about gardening, tea and freshly made ginger biscuits, and finished with a thank you to Georges family.)

And when not making things musical, he made toys - he collaborated with Mandy on creating a Noah's arc – he fashioned the figures, she painted the sea round the edge, and the box. Carmen remembers: "George was always keen to help and having a particular talent with wood lead to some very lovely surprises. I once bought my daughter some stilts for her Christmas, they were thin and flimsy and sadly broke after about a couple of weeks. Not long after, for Nina's 7th birthday, George produced a beautiful set of sturdy handmade stilts that gave them endless joy, which we still have."

The Singer – well, you can't play music and dance without singing too, can you? Catherine remembers being really moved when he sang at his father's funeral, and there was of course lots of folk singing, at Halsway and elsewhere.

The Francophile – he went regularly to visit his friends in France. All over France, and he loved it, the art, the food, the wine, the swimming – everything.

The Man of the Marshes

George's association with Winchelsea Beach began at an early age, because Jack and Olive had their holiday home here, and eventually retired here. They were also involved in the setting up of Rye Harbour Nature Reserve, of which George also became a huge supporter. Before Covid, he was cycling around the area regularly delivering the Friends newsletter.

Mandy, who first met George when she was in her teens, was the person who sparked his obsession with sheep, not only because she was a working shepherd herself, but because she gave him the toy sheep which started his collection. This was the one which "baa'd" when you tipped it up, and people who phoned George often got baa'd at when he answered. Catherine remembers his obsession with Sean the Sheep. He loved the kids cartoon character, and went with her and her daughter Jasmine to see the film in the cinema – they all loved it. He had a cuddly Sean with him in the care home at the end.

The gardener. George loved his garden. "I shouldn't be doing this, I'm an artist" – he cried while wielding sharp instruments, and indeed the injured finger we heard of earlier was caused by a chainsaw. He grew fruit and veg, constantly urging people to "have a few tomatoes", and kept chickens. He got Mandy into gardening, and later she helped him build his alpine rockery. Catherine remembers that garden produced well: *"I thought of his home grown sweetcorn and a bowl of cherry tomatoes, my first taste of corn eaten moments after picking (even raw) and the best tasting tomatoes. He would have a big bowl full of them at any summer gathering. This inspired me to grow them myself which I have done for years now"*

Carmen said he was *"always on the lookout for another 'bargain', and could not help himself when he saw an opportunity for something to add to his collection. This was usually accompanied by a gleeful look, cheeky glint to his eyes and a spring to his step - a nod that I needed to get my boots on and pack gloves, shovel and fork; an expedition was afoot. I would often find myself catapulted into the most bizarre situations, such as scooping up swathes of stonecrop on Winchelsea beach with spade in hand, whilst people walked past giving us the oddest looks, digging up irises along Pett Road, whilst cars slowed down to observe the oddity, scrambling up steep banks or finding myself knocking on some poor unsuspecting women's door along Winchelsea Road, asking if we can dig up some of her physalis that George so desperately wanted – luckily, she obliged us! If it wasn't acquiring plants, I might find myself on Lunford farm shovelling sacksful of manure from the biggest pile of sheep dung you ever seen, or shovelling free woodchip from outside Winchelsea primary school. You never really knew what to expect when working with George, the only thing you could be sure of was to expect the unexpected!"*

His friend Dru will now talk to us about Gardening – and Dancing, and George:

We first met George through swing dance classes. I was wary of the bent little old man in the corner, but once we found ourselves dancing together, I realised that he had a dancing style like no other. When his physical limitations got in the way, he adapted, a lot. A bit like Forrest Gump, you never knew what you were gonna get. He was renowned for helping new dancers conquer their fear of the dancefloor both in classes and at social dances. A legend in the Swing Dance community from the moment we started dancing (and long before), he was such a renowned character that it always felt like an honour to have become such good friends. And of course we had a shared love of Boaters and Bow ties!

Our gardening friendship started when we noticed a familiar figure at our open garden on 2015. Once he knew where we lived, and about our love of gardening he would started randomly popping by. Once he randomly went over and peed on our shed - he did this before explaining about his medical conditions rather than before, so we initially thought he just had different boundaries to what we might be used to. He would steal cuttings from just about anywhere, and often bring us cuttings from village halls, parks and other people gardens. It was soon after that we noticed he would happily help himself to the same from our garden if we didn't offer quick enough.

This of course led to requests from him for us to steal on his behalf. Early in the first lockdown I was riddled with guilt as I didn't know what the rules were about nicking a few bracken plants from the roadside.

And there was always something new with George. I remember the shock of visiting and seeing his cute little kittens in a feeding frenzy of blood and gore – he went on to explain how he didn't like to see good roadkill go to waste and would often stop at the roadside to scoop up a recent vehicle victim as a treat for the cats. Then there was the heinous, and as yet unidentified home brew get got us to try on news years day when we were already dealing with horrible hangovers. He collected interesting people when he met them, guaranteeing that any gathering at Stanhope would be as eclectic as a salon hosted by Oscar Wilde, often including singers and dancers from international and obscure backgrounds.

The petrolhead.

Martin Baker can't be here today, but has contributed his memories of George the petrolhead.

I first met Clive/ Georgio/ George in about 1966/7 when I was in my first year sixth form and Clive (as he was then) was just completing his sixth form journey. We met at the 750MC Tunbridge Wells centre and immediately hit it off. We shared a birthday, with Clive being two years older.

At that time I lived in Wilmington near Dartford and drove an Austin Seven Ruby. Clive went off to Hatfield Poly to read production engineering but I guess soon got side tracked by his joint love of Music and Austin Sevens.

I remember visiting him in 1969 at his landlady's where he had taken over the storage of Austin Seven parts (he was by then 750 MC spares secretary). About that year we had attended our very first Beaulieu Autojumble, getting up very early (5.00!) to get a lift in the back of an old Land Rover with Alan Raeburn (Rablah). I don't remember what Clive bought but I got a pair of correct headlamps for my recently purchased Austin Seven Speedy.

I went on to Essex University and our friendship continued.

I remember that Georgio's 21st birthday present to me in 1970 was eight pints of Castrol XXL, which I jealously guarded for the first outing of my Speedy in 2000!

I remember Georgi appearing with permed hair to fit in with his medieval madrigal singing which led him onto setting up his period music stand business. I remember him expressing great delight at obtaining some thirty-year seasoned apple wood. He then got into manufacturing period keyboard instruments. Georgio arrived at our house in Welling one frosty evening just before Christmas and we invited him to stay for dinner. At that time he was driving an ex-Post Office van and he asked if he may bring his harpsichord into the house because it didn't like wild temperature swings. So after dinner we had the pleasure of a harpsichord recital in our front room Unforgettable! The same harpsichord was played at George's wonderful 70th birthday party.

When George was describing the building of his harpsichord he told me that traditionally the "pluckers" were made from bramble wood but now were produced in plastic. I opined that probably the bramble wood were better but George quickly stated that the plastic versions were much better!

When I took over the running of the Central London Austin Seven Group, George and I used to meet up for a Pizza at one of Pizza Express's first restaurants near the British Museum. Many a time did we put the world to rights!

Following George's severe medical challenges with his joints I remember him telling me that his work in Italy as consultant on keyboard instruments was of help due to the climate and red wine!

In recent years my wife, Paula, and I visited George's house several times in Winchelsea Beach and were most impressed with his vegetable growing exploits.

I am just so sorry I will not be able to attend George's memorial event but I will certainly never forget him. A very special friend and individual. The world needs more like him!

The artlover - Mandy, herself an artist, did painting and gilding for George on his music stands and instruments, and told me about a trip to France which she and her sister Cheryl took with George, which included visits to the Louvre and the Pompidou Centre in Paris, as well as staying in the Dordogne and the Pyrenees. His shelves groaned with art books.

The partygiver – Lots of people mentioned his 70th. He was planning a big bash in 2020 – which he possibly saw as his living wake, but Covid intervened.

This reading, from the Merchant of Venice, evokes an image of those party nights.

*How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;*

*Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.
Come, ho! and wake Diana with a hymn!
With sweetest touches pierce your mistress' ear,
And draw her home with music.*

The uncle and great uncle – This tribute has drawn enormously on the memories of George's friends, but of course he was a family man too. Catherine lived with him for a year when she was 20, helping him to look after his mother – a time she remembers not only for those vegetables, but for bridge lessons, life drawing, and the kindness he showed to Olive. He has given wise advice, too, to her daughter Jasmine, telling her to “keep hold of your individuality”

George's health, poor for some years, began to decline further last autumn. He was admitted to hospital, but Catherine could not see him in that period, but Catherine phoned him regularly, and spoke to him just ten minutes before he died. “What are you up to?” she asked. “Not a lot” he said “just looking at the trees”.

*We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.*