

Howard Thomas Palmer

23rd February 1946 - 13th August 2022

A Celebration of a Life

Harwood Park Crematorium

Friday 2nd September at 16.15

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

Remembering Howard

Howard was born in 1946, a post-war baby, to parents Beryl and Tommy Palmer in Cambridge. The family home was a typical terraced house but with many other relatives as neighbours in the same row of houses, indeed, uncle Len and Auntie Rosa lived a couple of doors away with their only child, their daughter Ann.

Despite a near ten-year age difference, Ann and Howard became like brother and sister.

As a child, emerging from post-war rationing and the first age of austerity, Howard was hugely influenced by his uncle Len who worked in catering and, during those lean years, uncle Len would regularly turn up with interesting left overs. Chocolate pudding was, by some distance, Howard's favourite.

Inspired by Len, Howard left Coleridge Boys' School and went on to do a City and Guilds Qualification at the local catering college.

Howard's first steps in the world of work were as a trainee chef at Lyons Corner House in London. Following this he returned to Cambridge and progressed to assistant manager at The Dorothy, a large venue which held tea dances in the ballroom where, during the swinging sixties, The Who, The Small Faces and, even a relatively unknown Liverpool group, The Beatles, played to crowds of excitable teenagers.

Also working at The Dorothy was Rose who was "chased hard" by Howard. Initially, Rose resisted. But one Saturday, on a rare evening off, Howard returned to The Dorothy and implored the manager to let Rose duck out and come to dinner with him. It worked. It was a turning point. A loving relationship of over fifty years began that evening.

At our family meeting we asked Rose what she first liked about Howard. She told us "well, he was very handsome. He had a blonde crew cut, he was stylish and very much more Mod than Rocker". She also liked Howard's wicked sense of humour and his "happy go lucky" nature.

Howard went on to work as an assistant manager at the Water End Barn in St. Albans where he was eventually promoted to manager. This was hard work, long hours and frequent weekends on shift.

By now Howard had become a father, firstly when Rachel was born in 1970 and again in 1973 when Jay was born. In 1978 the family would eventually move to Wheathampstead to the village that would be regarded as the family home for forty-three years.

But Howard was restless professionally. He was a man who was striving for independence and to be master of his own destiny. So, in a somewhat daring move, he quit catering and started his own cleaning company called Prime Cleaning Services. It was very much a family business with Rose - with Rachel, Jay and Tim all pitching in to help at times.

It is perhaps a little-known fact that Howard failed his eleven plus exams. This was something that always niggled Howard.

So he began an Open University Course. This was back in the pre-internet age. Howard would come home from a day's work and begin his studies, working his way through the late-night lessons on TV. And as the family suggest, it was good that Howard was more owl than lark.

Unfortunately, at the age of fifty, and just ahead of his finals, Howard suffered a stroke. Undeterred, he made special arrangements for an independent invigilator to monitor him at home so that he could take his finals. To say that he was proud he passed is an understatement.

Howard had picked and chosen from a whole range of modules for his degree. One of his choices was the History of Religion. At around the same time Howard saw an advertisement from the British Humanist Association for people to step up and become Humanist Celebrants. It did not take long for Howard to transition from cleaning to Celebrancy.

Humanist Celebrants are much more common in the funeral industry now but, back then, in the early 1990's Howard was part of an elite group who blazed a trail for others to follow. On hearing of Howard's passing, Andrew Copson, the CEO of Humanists UK wrote this for us today.

From Andrew Copson, CEO of Humanists UK (formerly the British Humanist Association)

“Howard was a pioneer at a time when humanist ceremonies were in their infancy, and humanist celebrants had huge challenges to break down the barriers of the establishment and tradition to give non-religious people the funerals they sought. Over the decades he served hundreds of families.”

“His contribution to the growth of the awareness of humanist ceremonies was considerable, as was the support he gave to the many humanist celebrants who followed in his footsteps. We are all very grateful for everything he did to sow the seeds for the Humanist UK celebrant network we have today.”

A quick survey from those Humanist colleagues who were there, or who followed in his footsteps, suggests that Howard was; “generous, avuncular, energetic, knowledgeable, an expert with integrity who was passionate about the rights of non-religious people”.

Howard excelled at relentlessly educating funeral directors and funeral arrangers about humanist ceremonies. He managed lists of local celebrants, introduced work their way and held regular meetings at his home. He was dedicated to the cause.

Howard was a man who was passionate about fairness. If he noticed wrongdoing, unethical practice or unfairness he was quick to write letters, back in the days when we still did that, in an attempt to correct wrongs.

But Howard was also a man who respected the views of others, even those that he disagreed with. He might debate with them endlessly, partly to try and change their mindset, but also to challenge his own. The debate with his good friend and Rachel's father-in-law, Tony about who was better - Elvis Presley or Buddy Holly - was never resolved.

Another friend that Howard debated with is Father David Teasdel. They may have held very different world views, but it is to the credit of both of them that they remained good friends. Father David has a few memories about Howard that he would like to share with us now.

Memories from Father David Teasdel

“Ladies and gentlemen, all we have is each other, that is all we have but all we need”. Familiar words uttered by Howard at the end of many a funeral ceremony. Words that were honest, true and part of the reason why he was the natural choice for funerals

Howard was a respectful man of integrity and honesty. You knew he was a safe, gentle and trusted pair of hands who would gently and sincerely lead a very personal service. His skill was not making it all about himself, and reflecting back what he had gleaned about the deceased from the families he met.

Celebrants need something to sustain through the grief they have to process. For Howard, it was the love of his family and particularly Rose his soulmate who made him whole. In phone calls and conversations, Rose was never far away: in the background joining in or as the subject of the conversation. There was always plenty of love and laughter. Rose and the family were his rock, that enabled him to say “all we have is each other, that is all we have but all we need” with such conviction and sincerity on funerals because it was true.

He was immensely supportive of my ordination, it was an honour to have him and Rose at my ordination even though he said he felt like “a pork chop at a Jewish wedding” as only he would. He was there, and that meant so much. I still have a photo from that day of me and him laughing, probably at a rude joke one of us had told the other.

I will miss his greeting on the phone....the words “my boy” and that soft warm chuckle. Howard was grounded and true, never taking himself too seriously. It enabled him to have no issue at one funeral when, at the family’s request, a fart machine was attached to the coffin, and when he and bearers bowed at the coffin the “fart button” was pressed. He even won a bottle of champagne at a Humanist gathering when there was a competition as the best/funniest thing that they had experienced. We need to be clear, this is not to say that he didn’t take things seriously, he did. He worked with families to provide them with what they wanted, and was sensitive to their needs. When a family decided a day before the funeral of daughter that they did not want the Roman Catholic priest due to a disagreement, Howard was the natural choice. He enabled them to have a celebration of their beloved daughter’s short and tragic life in a way that was sensitive to their needs and grief. At the point of committal he graciously allowed religious words to be said. And it meant so much to that family.

Howard’s legacy should be those words “all we have is each other, that is all we have but all we need”. It sustained him and made him who he was.

Remembering Howard

Howard's father died at a young age, leaving his mother, Beryl, a widow. But Howard stepped up to care for her. Beryl might call to inform him that she had run out of gravy powder. Howard would make the seventy mile round trip to Cambridge, sometimes at unreasonable hours, to help. Howard was relieved when Beryl moved much closer to Wheathampstead.

Howard was not a huge fan of driving. Eventually the time would come when someone in the car would ask "are we lost?" Howard would always claim that they were not lost, but that they were "taking the long way around".

But these examples are important because Howard was a man with absolute dedication to his family. Family always came first. There was never much time for family holidays due to work, but Howard made up for it by holding huge summer BBQ's, not just for the extended family but for neighbours and friends. On more than one occasion, over one hundred people somehow gathered in the family garden.

Christmas was similarly over the top and important. Which leads us to this note from Howard's Grandchildren.

From Howard's Grandchildren

Our favourite memories of our Gan Gan were always at Christmas. We'd wake him up at 6 in the morning wanting to open our presents immediately. He'd dutifully oblige despite having had 4 hours sleep following an evening of drinking which fuelled the process of building toys, bikes and play sets along with the other "adults" once we had gone to bed.

The next morning, he would observe the present opening melee (mainly of the things he'd helped put together in a silent frenzy) and would enthusiastically shout from the corner of the room (where the sofa and, importantly, his coffee were) "what is it" // "is it an aircraft" (despite the present(s) in question clearly being bikes).

He was a man with - as many have said - a wicked sense of humour and an absolute dedication to his family (which is something we will always remember him for).

Remembering Howard

Howard was thrilled when Tim proposed to and married his daughter Rachel. The couple had known each other since they were fifteen and Tim's parents, Pam and Tony, have been very close friends to Howard and Rose for decades.

Then there were the late night, deep conversations after the pub with his son Jay, putting the world to rights. Old movies were a familiar theme and wild plans were made to open a cinema that showed only films they liked. An idea that was both behind and ahead of its time.

And Howard's retirement years were not just about his favourite things; holidays, ice cream, hot dogs and fish and chips, but he had a new role to play as grandfather, or rather, Gan Gan to Tom, Rhys and Millie.

Howard's winter years were not easy. They seldom are for anyone. Howard first noticed the onset of Parkinson's disease in 2012. He was quiet and stoic. Eventually there came the pandemic years and a difficult stay in hospital.

Following his stay in hospital, Howard was wonderfully cared for at home where his wicked sense of humour was still very much in evidence. One visitor remarked that his room was more like a scene from a Carry On movie.

And when the end came, Howard was aware enough to know that his family had been with him that day. He waited until they had left and slipped peacefully away on 13th August 2022. He was just seventy-six.