

A celebration of life Peter Collins

26th February 1940 – 30th October 2021

1pm, 29th November 2021, Kent & Sussex Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

Humanists UK is a registered charity no. 285987 and limited company no. 228781 in England and Wales. Humanists UK, 39 Moreland Street, London, EC1V8BB, 020 7324 3060

Peter was born in London on February 26th 1940, shortly before the start of the blitz. He was the eldest son of Eileen and Patrick Collins, and he was soon to be joined by siblings Anne, Andrew and Michael. Anne is with us today, welcome Anne. She has written movingly about Peter.

He looked after me all my life.

He was the steady sensible one, I was the wild one always getting into trouble and he was always there to save me.

It was decided by our parents that Peter should go to St Dominic's boarding school. Apparently I kicked up such a fuss I was allowed to go as well, even though I was only four, I didn't want to be parted from him. Then we travelled out to Singapore on a boat, on our own to join, our parents. Peter could swim but I couldn't so one day he just pushed me in the deep end and yes, I swam.

When we returned to the UK we lived in Hallam Street, London. There I remember him building loads of planes from balsa wood and we would go to Regents Park to fly them. Some even had motors.

We had lots of fun living in Stanley, Hong Kong with a beautiful beach just down the road. We used to gather with friends on flat roofs of the beach houses, which had future consequences!!

I went down to see him once and he asked me to meet him in his office. I got funny looks as I walked through the offices. When I got to his door I knew why. In Hong Kong he took a photo of me with a towel covering my swimsuit with hands up and he had blown it up to full size and put it on his door.

Back in the UK we lived in Boscombe Down but Peter stayed in Tonbridge with his job. He brought Maureen down in his new Austin 7, well new to him, Maureen had to wear wellies and rain hat when it rained because of a holes in the floor and roof.

He stayed the rest of his life in that area, marrying his beloved Maureen, with three wonderful children. He discovered Folk Singing and it became his life

Thank you for those words, Anne.

The itinerant childhood which Anne has described was down to their father being an RAF pilot. Peter completed his schooling at Stowmarket High School, while his father was based at RAF Wattisham, then went on to study Electronic Engineering at Lewisham Technical College before being apprenticed with Hong Kong Electric. He then moved on to Seeboard, where he spent most of his working life.

He was based in Sevenoaks, where he played Rugby for the Old Juddians, swam, and played water polo, and he developed his passion for cars. Once when driving in that Austen 7, a wheel fell off and

rolled on in front of them – fortunately they stayed upright because of Peter’s greater weight on the one side.

In February 1959 Peter’s landlady, Margaret, decided that, as he was new to Sevenoaks, she would organise a party for his 19th birthday. Most of her friends were much older than him so she decided to invite somebody his age. She knew that Maureen and several other girls travelled with him on the Greenline bus to Beckenham Baths for winter training from the Kent County swimming coach. Without his knowledge, Margaret met up with these girls on their way to the bus station and asked for a volunteer! Maureen was the one who was slowest to step back.

Some months later Maureen was due to be bridesmaid for a friend at work. Peter was not invited to the wedding but had arranged to travel from Sevenoaks to meet her in Tunbridge Wells in the evening. As he walked up to Sevenoaks bus station to go to Tunbridge Wells, he almost bumped into this beautiful apparition. In full bridesmaid’s dress and looking wonderful, Maureen had decided she wouldn’t wait for the evening. That was it. He was completely smitten!

Their courtship was in part conducted through their swimming, and they were Men’s and Ladies’ captains of Sevenoaks Swimming Club when they got married in 1963.

Perhaps because of Peter’s early experience of being dragged around the world, once Peter and Maureen settled in Rustlings in 1971, when Becky was a baby, that was it. As the family grew with the arrival of Mat and Liz and they needed more space, Peter just built it on. The three of them had great childhoods, growing up with a Dad who was “Google before Google” and knew everything. He built them balsa wood gliders and remote control airplanes, and didn’t grumble – much – when they smashed them with rough landings. After all, he’d done the same himself as a child. He was an early adopter of computers, and brought a BBC Micro B home from work to “try out”. He’d borrow a film projector and show films at home, and he’d organise children’s Christmas parties for Seeboard, which his three at first attended, and then helped out at.

They loved to hear stories of his exploits, including his participation the Royal Spa Tiddling, a grand outdoor version of Tiddlywinks, but largely an excuse for drinking as this excerpt from the rules shows:

At any point during the coursing the wink may be tiddled to a hostelry of the “Tippler’s Runner’s” choice. On reaching the threshold of such a hostelry the “Wink Watcher ” shall utter the ritual cry of “At the Tippling Stand.” The wink may then be placed in the Tiddler’s Purse for safe keeping whilst in the hostelry proof of the quaffing shall be obtained, such proof to be termed a “Tippler’s Fancy”. When the ale be quaffed and the “Tippler’s Fancy” procured, the Tippler’s Runner shall cry “Wink out” and place the wink on an ‘easy lay’ outside the hostelry.

Later came the grandchildren, Sam, Clara, Arthur and Tristan. The fact that Maureen and Peter lived so close to the school meant that both generations, and their friends, spent a lot of time at Rustlings, and the grandchildren have particularly fond memories of their Wednesday afternoons.

The grandchildren also remember getting into Nanna and Grandad's bed in the morning for rich tea biscuits, drawing 'lubberdubs and buggerwahs' (ladybirds and butterflies), drinking a 'dubberdee' (cup of tea), reading bedtime stories after a bath with Nanna bubbles (Badedas) and having Bumberly Eggs (scrambled eggs).

And we'll now pause to hear Peter himself sing "Cool of the Day". Remember to join in if you wish.

Music: Cool of the Day, sung by Peter Collins

Peter and Maureen just loved their garden, and spent a lot of their married lives in garden centres – often followed around by mutinous children. Peter built a rockery in the garden from sandstone purloined from – well, elsewhere in the village.

There were a few years in the 1990s when Peter was out of the country a lot, working as a consultant for firms in Ukraine and Kazakhstan. Although Maureen went out to visit him, and he came back as much as he could, it was not ideal. Becky came to live at Rustlings with her Mum for a while so Sam could start school in Wadhurst, and they even did a bit of redecorating and reorganising, though Peter did not approve when he got back to find things changed.

We should also mention his size and his strength, of course. His brother Michael, who can't be here today because he lives in the States, recalls:

On a rainy dark night when I was about 17 I was driving with Peter. As we came around a corner in the road we came across a police car upside down in the middle of the road. We jumped out a saw the two police officers still stuck in the vehicle. We tried to get them out, but the doors would jam on the ground as we pulled on them. But I had forgotten I was riding with "Big Pete". When I pulled on the door again it came free of the ground. When I looked up I saw Peter under the front bumper, lifting the car up. The police scrambled out and Peter put the car down.

That was Peter - one minute singing and drinking good beer, the next doing whatever it took to help those around him. Just some of the reasons I loved him so much.

And he was of course gadget-man. He'd buy the right equipment for whatever he was doing at the time, be it building an extension, improving his computing power or making a musical instrument. At the end of the project, he'd put the equipment away – somewhere. But could he find it the next time he needed it? No. So he'd buy another. "There are six versions of everything in the house" said Mat, who continued to be a bit of an expert on where tools could be found even after he'd left home. And Liz is proud that enough of her father's spirit has rubbed off on her that she recently fixed the washing machine.

This poem by Edgar Albert Guest sums him up:

"It couldn't be done"

*Somebody said that it couldn't be done
But he with a chuckle replied
That "maybe it couldn't," but he would be one
Who wouldn't say so till he'd tried.
So he buckled right in with the trace of a grin
On his face. If he worried he hid it.
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn't be done, and he did it!*

*Somebody scoffed: "Oh, you'll never do that;
At least no one ever has done it;"
But he took off his coat and he took off his hat
And the first thing we knew he'd begun it.
With a lift of his chin and a bit of a grin,
Without any doubting or quiddit,
He started to sing as he tackled the thing
That couldn't be done, and he did it.*

*There are thousands to tell you it cannot be done,
There are thousands to prophesy failure,
There are thousands to point out to you, one by one
The dangers that wait to assail you.
But just buckle in with a bit of a grin,
Just take off your coat and go to it;
Just start in to sing as you tackle the thing
That "cannot be done," and you'll do it.*

And he loved genealogy. He spent many hours recording conversations with his mother, on which he based his research, and he collected old maps to get a better understanding of where his ancestors lived.

We'll now hear "Over the Hill", sung by Peter.

Over the Hill, sung by Peter Collins

Peter's passion really started when he was organising Medieval Banquets, which led him on to making period instruments. Then he fell in love with the singing of June Tabor, which fully awoke his passion for folk music. His instrument building was supported by this friend Rob Smith, who imported timber for various purposes including making violin bows. But the bows could only be made from the very centre of the wood, which meant Peter could acquire all the offcuts for his instrument making.

Becky and Mat remember being dragged off to folk clubs when they were small, and being tucked up in their sleeping bags in the car. At the Broadstairs Folk Festival, they would stand up in a slightly adapted pram to watch the fireworks, and were sent down to the beach while Peter was singing at Neptune's Hall. He would come to find them with a pint of prawns, an experience which has turned Becky into the fastest prawn-peeler in the world.

And then there was the Morris Dancing, starting with The Royal Borough Morris Dancers, of which he was 'Squire' for many years. He would make many elements of the 'kit' for the dancers including cutting the sticks, making the bell pads and baldricks and designing and creating the resin badges that indicated their membership. He also renovated 'Domit' the Morris Mascot who was named after a friend who was recognisable by his aroma! With the Royal Borough he performed at Rye on Boxing Day and the Easter Pace Egging. He also joined the Hartley Morris Men because he particularly enjoyed singing with them, particularly when they performed at dawn on May Day at The Coldrum Stones.

Liz remembers taking bookings for The Royal Borough Dance Band when she was still at primary school, and also being taken out of school early one day and whisked off to the Royal Albert Hall to see Eric Clapton. This had become a family tradition, with both Becky and Matt having had their turn. Just recently, while Peter was ill, she was working at the Albert Hall herself, and had the privilege of being taken right up to the dome and looking down. She was desperate to tell her Dad about it, and bought him a Royal Albert Hall Steward teddy bear.

Chrissy and Jim will now talk to us about their friend, Peter. Chrissy, first:

Music, particularly traditional music, was a very important part of Peter's life. He was a big man, with a big voice, and all over the country, be it at folk clubs or festivals, gatherings were enhanced and enriched by his song. He was a stalwart at these sessions; always supportive of other singers and especially encouraging to those new to the tradition. Indeed, it was at Horsham Folk Club that we first met Peter and Maureen, some 30 years ago. Then, as now, he was greatly respected and admired as a singer, and at folk clubs was often booked as a popular guest in his own right.

*But Peter didn't just join in singing sessions; he also played a key part in **creating** them, thereby ensuring the survival of this living tradition. Many instances of this spring to our mind; in particular, his 40-plus years of hosting (with Mike Nicholson) the lunch-time sings at "The Neps" at Broadstairs Folk Festival; the running of shanty sessions and sing-arounds at Tenterden Folk Festival and, not least as far as we're concerned, helping us sort out the "Sussex Sing" for the last twenty years or so. We are so grateful for the support that he and Maureen gave us.*

Peter was also a dab hand at anything technical to do with sound (and computers, cameras and printers), and recorded many of the famous "Song and Ale" weekends at Whittlebury; adding to an archive that increases in significance as the years pass by. It is also thanks to his wizardry that many local singers have also had their voices preserved for posterity: (Phil and Kay Birkin; Hartley Morris; Sandra Goddard and Bob Lewis, to name but a few.) And, fortunately for us, he leaves behind a rich legacy of his own recorded voice. The folk world owes a lot to Peter.

So, we are here today to celebrate the life of a big man, filled with love of family and friends and the determination to enjoy life as much as possible. In this he was ably assisted by Maureen, the love of his life and companion for nigh-on 60 years. Tragically, Maureen passed from us at the start of the Pandemic, and we were unable to collectively pay our respects and mark her passing. It is therefore fitting that we pay tribute to her here, for she was a lovely lady and an inseparable part of Peter's life.

Maureen really was a domestic goddess; an excellent cook whose cake-baking was legendary, indeed famous. She shared Peter's interest in good food, music and art and both had a passion for growing exotic garden plants; you could always spot their caravan at a folk festival because there, by the side of the caravan steps, would be an unusual shrub or flower, bought from a specialist nursery nearby, to be planted when they got home. Maureen and I shared an interest in jewellery and many a happy hour we spent in examining what was on offer at Craft Fairs or jewellery workshops. She would buy pieces from time to time, but these purchases were for family or friends; I don't ever remember her buying anything for herself, despite Peter's encouragement to do so. Tolerant and broad-minded, Maureen also had a wicked sense of humour and a keen sense of the ridiculous; qualities that stood her in good stead when faced with the onset of her debilitating illness; a challenge that both she and Peter met with such stoicism and bravery.

Peter cared for Maureen through those difficult times with a devotion that touched our hearts. Typically, he researched her condition, contacted a specialist support group, the PSP Association, and ended up supporting them as well. Truly a big man with a big heart.

But despite their trials and tribulations, Peter and Maureen led a good life. Peter loved the songs written by his good friend, Barrie Temple, and we find that the following words, written by Barrie when he learned of Peter's passing, captured the essence of them both:

We lived a full life and we treasured each day

And what fortune it brought us, we'd embrace it and say

All the love that we have, is the love we must give

So now and forever, that love it will live.

We are fortunate to have shared their friendship and will treasure the memories they have left us.

Thank you, Chrissy. And now Jim.

I don't want to talk for too long because I know Peter would be saying, "come on let's go down the Pub." It was about 30 years ago I first met him, I remember it was at the Horsham Folk club, I was relatively new to singing and I had just finished a song when this enormous bloke came striding up, he looked down at me, shook my hand and said hello I'm Peter and I liked your song. It was the beginning of a long and very special friendship.

So, the first thing I learnt about Peter, which I know you will all recognise, was that he was very friendly, warm and encouraging. The next things I learnt about him that evening was that he was a very fine singer with a big voice and also that he enjoyed a pint or two and although I cannot swear to remembering the beer that was on that night, I rather suspect it was Harvey's.

If I had a pint of beer for all the times I have sung with Peter over the years at folk clubs, Morris Ales, festivals, singarounds, parties and pubs. I would have drunk a great deal less than I actually did. For, as Peter would say, singing is thirsty work.

I don't want to give the impression that Peter only loved beer, he loved a great many things, most of all his family Maureen (very sadly missed), Becky, Matt, Liz and his grandchildren, he also loved his friends, his singing, music, the Morris, cooking, good food and good drink, computers, photography, gadgets, gardening, flowers, birds and other wildlife and most recently his dog Rowan, so many things; in fact he really loved life.

Peter was a humanist, he believed in people, he looked for the best in them and found it.

Losing Peter and Maureen is deeply sad but thank goodness we knew them.

Thank you, Jim. And now, let's hear Ingrid and Barrie singing another of Barrie's songs, "A Fond Farewell". Remember to join in if you wish.

A Fond Farewell, sung by Barrie and Ingrid Temple, written by Barrie Temple

Shortly after Maureen retired, Progressive Supranuclear Palsy started to affect her movement. It is such an unusual condition that it took 4 years of consulting with several specialists before it was diagnosed at Kings. Originally she was given a prognosis of five years, but in fact she survived for 12, this most certainly down to the efforts that Peter made to keep her engaged, sociable, and as involved in life as she could be. She taught him to cook – perhaps not up to her standard, but pretty well, and to make his own clothes, and he was her devoted carer until she died in 2020.

They had a another companion too. After a summer of having lots of family doggies in the house, Peter and Liz were desperately missing having furry friends around their feet so Liz asked her Dad if he would just have a think about the possibility of sharing the ownership of a dog. She couldn't have managed it on her own. He would have to look after the pup when she was away on tour as she works in live music. He instantly came up with reasons why not and she said 'I'm not going to try and talk you into it' as it had to be shared decision. Liz went off on tour and two days later, Peter texted Liz with website links to 'cavapoo puppies for sale'!

Unfortunately, when the day came to collect little puppy Rowan, Maureen was in hospital. Thankfully, the family were able to get Maureen home for that Christmas. Rowan loved her Nanna and would sit on Maureen's lap and give her lots and lots of kisses.

Rowan was such a great companion to both Peter and Liz, especially after losing Maureen and enduring the lockdowns together. Peter adored Rowan, and Liz and her Dad would talk of almost nothing but what Rowan had been up to each day.

It's a telling fact that Peter did not realise how badly his knees had deteriorated until after Maureen died – he had rarely been anywhere over the previous few years without having her with him, and her wheelchair had acted as a kind of un-noticed Zimmer frame. After he was no longer pushing it, the problem was obvious, and last summer he had both knees replaced.

This was, in turn, an indication that, much as he missed Maureen, he was eager to continue to enjoy life. He sold the caravan and replaced it with a smart new campervan, which quickly became a fixture on the music circuit. Rowan was his constant companion, and he'd take her up to Ashdown Forest and sit on a bench while she chased around. He was investigating the possibility of an off-road mobility scooter to make this kind of trip easier. He bought more carving equipment and created lots more pieces, including a magnificent owl for Mat.

It was after attending one of the events on the folk circuit – the Falmouth Voice Tour – that Peter became ill. He had been delighted that on the way back he had stopped at a garden centre where he had finally found the *Styrax Japonica* Snowfall that he and Maureen had been seeking for years. But he soon developed Covid symptoms, going into hospital for a second time on the 21st. Becky, Liz and Mat were restricted in both when they could visit, and by having to be in full PPE, but they were all with him for the last few hours of his life. And right to the end he was concerned about his beloved garden, trying to tell them it was time to plant the *Narcissus* Jenny bulbs he had left in the conservatory, the same flowers that decorated Maureen's coffin last year.