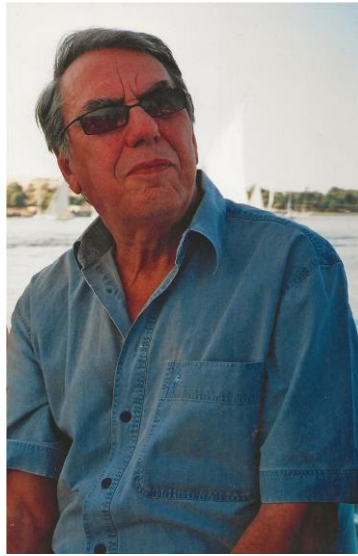


A celebration of the life of

Richard Walter Lawrence (Laurie)

28 March 1933 – 31 January 2023

10.15am, 13 March 2023, Surrey & Sussex Crematorium, Memorial Chapel



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

Margaret has written the story of Laurie's life:

Richard Lawrence, known as Laurie to close family and friends, was born in Kenton/Harrow. The childhood shared with his much-loved older siblings Michael and Sylvia was very happy, until they sadly lost their mother following a wartime air raid when Laurie was just ten years old.

He was evacuated three times during the war. One to Brough in Yorkshire, where the locals hardly knew there was a war on and were not very accepting of southerners. Leaning over his farm gate, a classmate accosted Laurie on his way to school one morning saying 'I'll put ma fist in tha gump' so prompting Laurie to find a different – and -- longer route to school to avoid him!

Rather surprisingly, the first place he was sent to as an evacuee, was Ramsgate - known then as 'bomb alley'. Watching the destroyers going up and down the channel sparked his dream of joining the Royal Navy - 'to see the world'!

Another tragedy for the family was the loss of his father when Laurie was aged eighteen. Laurie had joined the Navy two years earlier when he was just sixteen.

He was first married in 1953 to Sheila. Susan was born, followed soon after by Kay and Anne when he was stationed in Malta.

During this time his ship the HMS Forth, serving the 1st submarine squad, was regularly away from base several weeks at a time 'showing the flag' around the Mediterranean Sea.

He served as a Petty Officer Writer, calculating every sailor's individual pay and handing out the exact number of notes and coins due into the upturned caps of the lined-up queue of sailors.

Just as in Nelson's day the sleeping arrangements were hammocks hung up in communal areas. Once he had his own office, he would lay his out on his desk to gain more privacy. He would get a rating to scrub his hammock in exchange for his daily tot of rum, issued to all seamen in those days.

Other ships he served on were the HMS Jamaica and a short spell on the HMS Belfast. In recent years visiting this famous ship, now moored on the Thames, he recognised 'his' enormous five foot safe was still in situ.

On another occasion his ship was sent to The Navy Yard in New York for repairs, and whilst there some local families volunteered to entertain various members of the crew. Laurie was lucky enough to be taken to the famous jazz club 'Birdland' on a night when George Shearing, the blind London pianist was appearing. This experience helped spark his lifelong interest in Jazz music.

Seeing the gruesome effects of war in the Suez debacle - his ship was the first ship in and last ship out, he left the navy after serving for ten years.

Adjusting to civilian life after having everything taken care of in the forces was hard. He tried selling The Encyclopaedia Britannica, helped to build Ipswich College, failed a bus driver's test after driving the vehicle up a bank, and had a job selling seeds to farmers. That summer was hot, and once, when the car windows were wide open, a farm dog leapt inside the car which gave him a quite a shock! Severe hay fever was also problematic when visiting the farms. Running an off licence in Dagenham lasted a little longer.

His whole world changed when a fellow ex-naval colleague suggested applying for a job selling hearing aids. He thought this job would be a cinch as everybody would want to hear better, but, in fact, everybody would prefer to hear better, but did not want to actually *wear* a hearing aid.

Amplivox in Bond Street had a very diverse clientele and Laurie's years in the Navy had taught him how to get on with all types of people. The author, Somerset Maugham, Nubar Gulbenkian (Mr. 5%) and Roy Plumley, the originator of 'Desert Island Discs' were amongst those he fitted.

Describing eccentric wealthy businessmen and elderly ladies whose aids would be tucked into their décolleté necklines gave ample opportunities for amusing dinner party stories in the years to come. The size of hearing aids in the 1960s was nothing like the tiny instruments available today. Some powerful ones had to be strapped to a thigh with wires leading, under clothing, up to the ear.

The most famous hearing aid patient he saw was Winston Churchill – although Winston did not see him! Being summoned to the One, London address to repair Churchill's aid Laurie found him asleep in the chair. Realising it was just a piece of tubing that needed to be changed, this was done whilst the great man slept through the whole procedure.

After becoming the branch manager in Bournemouth, he moved on to Bristol to run the audiology department at Dunscombes, a large optical practice.

Eyes and ears were found to go very well together when Margaret joined the practice, and their first home was Jasmine Cottage, Wraxall, near Bristol, where they welcomed their children Tim and Amy.

The family were quite sad to move away to Harpenden when Laurie eventually become Managing Director of Amplivox which, at the time, was the largest hearing aid retailer in the country. After some changes they eventually settled in East Grinstead 42 years ago.

The skills he developed enabled him to diversify into the manufacturing side of his profession, the factory in Horley gaining NHS contracts to supply aids for severely deaf children.

As president of companies in France owned by a wealthy Zurich entrepreneur, he was regularly wined and dined at exclusive top Paris restaurants. He enjoyed the many contacts made exporting throughout Europe and particularly the Middle East. At the time of the annual Hajj, hundreds of hearing aids would be ordered for the great influx of pilgrims.

During that time, he frequently travelled abroad, and visited America many times attending international audiology gatherings. He was on a flight to Chicago on the morning of 09/11 2001, the day terrorists attacked and destroyed the Twin Towers in New York. His plane was turned back halfway across the Atlantic.

His love of travel was shared with Margaret, and over their long and happy life together they visited half the countries in the world. From Tibet to Timbuctoo, the Seychelles to Alaska, a mixture of education and adventure.

They would regularly see Shakespeare productions in Stratford and often visited the London theatres and galleries. At weekends they enjoyed long walks with good friends always planning to end up at a Harvey's pub. With Jean and Mike, they walked the length of three Sussex rivers - the Cuckmere, Arun and Ouse ending each with a dip in the sea. Seaford was a favourite place to relax with family and his young grandchildren in later years.

He had a taste for gourmet meals, here, on their many worldwide travels, and especially during scallop's week in Rye. Food was always an important feature in his life, and there were many great social entertaining occasions shared with friends.

The garden of Jasmine Cottage, East Grinstead was a well-used delight. Margaret would do all the clever bits, but Laurie would be in charge of the 'Robomow' robotic lawnmower, anxiously watching its random progression crisscrossing the lawn.

In 1990 Laurie was appointed town councillor, representing the Liberal Democrats for eight years. His civic duties ended with a year as Mayor of East Grinstead in 1998-99. Although both he and his Lady Mayoress were working full time 192 engagements were carried out during that busy year in addition to Laurie's routine council meetings. He very much enjoyed the privilege of being the Town Mayor and his eyes were opened as to how many things went on in the town and to how much the presence of the mayor was appreciated at various events. Visting Verbania in Italy on three occasions, so well organised by the Town Twining committee, were highlights during those years.

His council commitments were followed by other civic roles. He became a non-exec director of the Queen Victoria Hospital and was an early chairman of Chequer Mead Theatre and Arts Centre, twice chair of the Meridian Probus club and, for a short while, vice-chair of the East Grinstead Society. Still keeping up his political interests with friends, he would regularly join fellow 'ad-libbers' in The Ship having animated discussions and 'putting the world to rights'.

Always thoughtful, courteous, and kind he would show great interest in other people's lives. Caring for those less fortunate than himself he was appointed a trustee of Refugees Welcome Crawley and joined in with the Talk Club organised to support Syrian refugee families newly settled in East Grinstead.

His life has touched many people, a man:

- who contributed a great deal to the local community
- who warmed the lives of many friends
- to his family he is irreplaceable.

To his wife, Margaret – the love of his life -- for over 55 years he was the best friend anyone could have.

And Now Chris Rolly, Town Clerk during Laurie's period on the Town Council and then friend, will talk to us about him.

It is an honour and privilege for me to say a few words about Laurie, someone I first got to know as an active and hard-working town councillor in East Grinstead. After his term of office ended, he, along with Margaret, became two of my and my wife Sue's most cherished friends. I would very much like to share with you some of his civic and community life, and my personal recollections.

I met Laurie for the first time on Monday 13 May 1991, a few minutes before the Annual Town Council meeting commenced at 7.45 in the evening. I remember he made an early intervention, which made me sit up and take note. The minutes of the meeting confirm this. He expressed concern and disappointment that places on two of the committees had not been allocated on a more equitable basis. His choice of words was typical of the man, not anger but concern and disappointment; far more effective. With his powerful voice, clarity of expression, and imposing stature, I marked him out immediately as one to watch. For the first four years his party, Liberal Democrats, were in the minority, but in 1995, greatly assisted by scandals in the Major government and a rocky national economy, the Liberal Democrats took all the seats locally and Laurie, by now an experienced councillor took on significant positions of authority, chairman of Finance and General Purpose Committee in 1995 and 1996, then Deputy Town Mayor in 1997, culminating in the Mayoralty in 1998.

That administration period of 1995 to 1999 saw tremendous activity and upheaval in the Town, much of it positive. It was of course the time that Chequer Mead was built. Laurie as Finance Chair held the purse strings. We had £2,410,000 allocated for the project, and when the last bill was paid, we had just over £100 in hand, a tremendous achievement, and his firm hand on the tiller, an analogy I think he would appreciate, was significant to the outcome. Other achievements, which Laurie helped to engineer, and was proud of, included the purchase of The Old Auction Saleroom building in Cantelupe Road as the new Town Museum, which the Council then gave to the Museum for a peppercorn sum, the installation of the Town's CCTV cameras, and completion of the first East Grinstead Sports Development and Facilities Plan, following extensive consultation with clubs, the two secondary schools, and our principal councils. It was during his tenure also that significant steps were taken to enhance relationships with the Chamber of Commerce, and business community generally. I know that following Laurie's personal interventions, one new business relocated to East Grinstead, and another was encouraged to invest a million pounds in their offices, a most significant sum at that time.

As was stated in the eulogy, during his year as Town Mayor, Laurie undertook 191 official engagements and attended 42 council and committee meetings. All of this in addition to running a demanding business. During that year also, he raised over £10,000 for his two charities, Friends for the Young Deaf, who were based at East Court, and the Queen Victoria Eye Bank, then the second largest in the country. Ears and Eyes, areas of health that were so important in both Laurie's and Margaret's lives.

Of all the Mayoral engagements he undertook the one that gave him especial pleasure was a privately funded holiday he and Margaret took to Kwa Zulu Natal in South Africa. Visiting the town of Dundee with David Bennett, the then Headmaster of Sackville School, the seeds were planted to facilitate the friendship link between the two towns which Margaret Collins, as incoming Mayor, concluded the following year. Interestingly, when I visited the Town Council offices a couple of weeks back to check on the accuracy of some of this information from the records, I saw the Friendship certificate prominently positioned in the Town Mayor's Parlour. It seemed apposite somehow.

Throughout his years as an elected representative, Laurie personified what is best in any public servant – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership. Lord Nolan could have used him as a template in preparing his 7 principles of public life. Many current parliamentarians could take lessons from his conduct.

Laurie came off the Town Council in 1999. He wanted to make way for fresh blood and serve his community in different ways. He wanted to join Probus in East Grinstead, but the Club membership was full. Ever resourceful, he helped establish the new Meridian Probus, where he served two non-consecutive terms as Chairman. He was active in the East Grinstead Society and much valued the work they do seeking to protect the historic town centre, and the wider town and its environs, from detrimental building activity that could impact the unique local architectural heritage and identity. Again, he served assiduously, including spells as Vice Chairman, and as a committed and informed member of the Planning Sub-Committee.

He also served on the independent Chequer Mead Trust Charity, including some three years as Chairman. These were difficult years, but he worked at this relentlessly and served with honour throughout. He also found time to serve two terms as a non-executive Director of the Queen Victoria Hospital Trust. This period coincided with many national awards and the Trust being consistently rated as top in the country, including for patient care. There was also a brief period of a few years when Laurie was the regular Compere for the ConChord Big Band.

I recall a memorable weekend with him, when the Band was playing at the Assembly Halls in Bath, as well as several concerts at Chequer Mead. There was so much more besides.

I started this by saying that Laurie became a friend after he left the Council and so he did. My work mantra in relation to councillors was, be friendly to all and friends to none. So, after his period of councillorship ended in 1999 you can imagine how touched I was by his saying to me that he'd like to become friends as he and I had always got on well, and Sue and Margaret likewise. Everyone here today will have their own stories to tell, and memories to nourish, and there will be one consistency in these, when Laurie became your friend, it was a lifelong commitment and an eternal pleasure.

Our friendship focussed on a mutual love of East Gristead, long leisurely dinners often with Simon and Susie Kerr, occasional walks, books, the arts, interest in each other's families, Laurie was so very proud of his, and a forensic interest in current affairs and politics. Laurie was always interested, always interesting.

And this brings me to my concluding comments. Laurie was a man who believed in fairness and social justice. He could see through cant and hypocrisy from a distance and would challenge propagators of bigotry and populism. He was always on the side of the underdog and the marginalised. He cared deeply, and caring is a wonderful legacy.

Thank you, Chris.

