

A Celebration of the life of

Gavin John Phillips

15 October 1946 – 19 July 2024

22 August 2024, West Herts Crematorium

Celebrant: Kate Hobson



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Gavin Phillips was a much-loved brother, father, uncle, grandfather, fellow rugby player and supporter, drinking partner and friend. He had an unquenchable thirst for life – and an almost unquenchable thirst for Guinness! But his time in the pub wasn't spent in the pursuit of intoxication – it was for good humour, deep discussions on anything and nothing (particularly sport), fellowship, and larks. And the friends he made there were true ones – when it mattered they were there for him.

The music played at the start of Gavin's ceremony of farewell reflected the importance to Gavin of both rugby and his Irish heritage. At school he excelled in rugby *and* athletics, which helped to make up for not being the best at following school rules, which made things tricky at times.

He wasn't interested in the routine constraints of society – after losing one of his jobs for refusing to wear a tie he found it was preferable to be his own boss. But he had a natural predisposition to courtesy and a desire to make people happy. He never felt he had to conform, but was the first to help with the washing up, and he was always well turned out – he wasn't brought up by military parents for nothing!

He was known for his love of burnt sausages, but in recent years this once got a bit out of hand when he set off for one of his long walks that he loved so much, forgetting to turn off the hob, and returned to his flat to find that the whole community had been evacuated!

Life was for living, and Gavin did it his own way. If things went awry he adapted to the situation – when he lost his driving licence he swapped his van for a wheelbarrow to carry his tools from job to job.

He enjoyed fixing things for people, and some of his landscaping business clients kept coming back to him for 40 years – he was loyal, loveable, quietly spoken and calm, and they liked and trusted him.

When he became a father he was so proud to have Tim, who was the apple of his eye from day one. And he was more than happy to be a father to Gina too.

A Tribute to Gavin by Gina

Born in Donaghadee, County Down in Northern Ireland to Arthur and Norah Phillips, Gavin grew up with his twin sisters, Wendy and Carole around this area of Bangor and Holywood. I remember him telling me that when he was still a babe in arms his mother made the long, and probably potentially risky, journey across Europe with the three of them to be with their father who was stationed in Hamburg. When they returned to Ireland they settled in a rather grand house in Larne, which I remember to be next to the sea where the ferries came in.

He talked about being sent to boarding school, which I feel was a tradition and where his father had attended. I'm not sure he liked being away from his mum, but feel that's where his passion for sport and socialising began – enjoying athletics and rugby. On leaving school he told me he came over to England to do fruit picking over some long, hot summers and then eventually moved over permanently to work as a draughtsman and shared a flat with his good friends, Stan, Bob and Phil.

This was when his lifelong relationship with Sudbury Court Rugby Club began. He loved the game of rugby and loved his position as a winger, as much as he loved the camaraderie, drinks and high jinks with his team members in the bar afterwards. Doing some of my growing up at the club, I remember giggling to the drunken rude songs sang by the big hairy men standing on tables!

His great friend, John Kelly recently told me that Gavin was the only member of the first team to play out over five decades, when he was invited to play in a match in 2000.

Gavin also became a regular feature at the Club dinners with his Dave Allen style stand-up routine. We hear from some tributes on the club's Facebook page that his 'wire coat hangers' monologue was hilarious! Would love to have heard that!

He met my Mum when I was five and took me on as his own. We lived in a rented flat in Bushey Heath and between rugby and Guinness, he became a landscape gardener. He was obviously good at it, as he soon built up a word-of-mouth clientele around Bushey, Stanmore, Hatch End, Pinner and even out to Ruislip, many of his customers becoming lifelong friends.

Five years after they met came the joyous news of baby Tim being born, and it was then that we moved to the house they bought in School Lane.

I never realised how perfect Bushey was for him, as a quick pint on the way home could include a pub crawl of the 17 pubs from The Windmill at Bushey Heath down to The Load of Hay on Watford Heath. He seemed to be a regular in most of them!

Throughout my life, I never doubted his love for me. Although at times I was exasperated by some of his escapades, he would never fail to win me over with his soft Irish lilt telling me to 'whist now', a smile and a twinkle in his eye (whether it be the blue eye or the brown one!). There was always a sense of fun, nothing was ever too serious and he was a great story teller. He used to regale long stories to me of his time building the railroads in Burma – it wasn't until I was well into adulthood that I realised he was nowhere near old enough to have done this!

He was fiercely proud of his family here and in Ireland. I visited a few times with him and our mum in my childhood, driving up to Stranraer in a clapped-out old Bedford van with a mattress in the back to make the ferry crossing over. Always an adventure due to the state of his vans and the fact I don't think he ever truly believed in MOT's, tax and insurance!

He visited us often in Brighton once Oliver was born and the visit would always entail a pub visit. I was never sure how many beers were consumed before the family Christmas's down with us, but he always turned up with a cooked ham, carved the turkey and had me and my aunt in giggles whilst helping us wash up. It was at an after-dinner conversation on such a day that my partner Andy remembers when during an in-depth discussion on how many pints of water should be drunk in a day that Gavin piped up with the fact that 'surely water's only for washing'!

He never failed to surprise me – I remember him taking trips to Wales to go potholing, completing the Three Peaks Challenge in 24 hours and even doing a bungee jump!

Sadly dementia slowly crept in and although a diagnosis came in 2019, thanks to the Bushey & Oxhey pub community and Joe, Phil and the other residents at Faithfield where he lived, he managed to stay in his flat until it became too dangerous to do so. We visited every week with meals and to drink tea, etc. and quite often there were unusual things happening. Oliver once asked me why there were a red pair of thick rubber gloves sticking out of Gavin's van fuel filler hole..... It wasn't until months after, when I decided to descale his kettle that I found the petrol cap inside it!!

In October 2020, he got taken into care. This was the saddest day ever, as it was like caging a free spirit. Although I must say, the next day I did get a call from Elaine at the Railway saying 'Errr Gina, I've got your Dad here, ordering a Guinness'! It felt legendary that he had escaped!

These last few years have been excruciating for us watching his decline though this cruel disease. Up until recently, although he was immobile and not really with it, I still felt I got a smile and a mumble and also (it may have been involuntary but timely) a raise of an eyebrow when I told him Oliver was due to turn 18 and would be able to have his first legal beer!

He never seemingly had much, but obviously felt rich around his family and friends, a good pint of Guinness and someone to discuss the sport with. We now hope he is finally at peace, enjoying some Irish, country or jazz music, jigging and doing high kicks with abandon and raising a glass with our recently departed Uncle.

Whist now Gavin, rest easy, we love you.

A Tribute to Tim's Dad by Gav's son

The saying goes you can choose your friends but not your family. I was one of the lucky ones that had a Dad that was also my best mate. I was proud to be Gav's son, or most of the time anyway, unless he was up to his 'antics or general stupidity' as he liked to call it.

As a kid, it was fairly cool to have a Dad from Holywood, but it was the grey overcast one, not the sunny one with palm trees! We spent a lot of holidays going back 'home' to Ireland to visit his Mum who lived in a grand house next to the sea, and we had great fun playing with Dad's old toys, most of which we still have today.

Sport was always a big part of Dad's life, whether it be playing it or watching it. He loved talking about the Irish greats; Barry McGuigan, George Best and Pat Jennings and how the cricket team beat the West Indies in the 60's after taking them out for an all-night session on the Guinness the night before the match. Rugby was his number one passion and he enjoyed playing throughout his life, at school in Dublin and then on to Old Wesley Rugby Club which, as he always reminded us, the Irish legend Phil Orr played for.

After arriving in England he spent many years playing for the Sudbury Court Rugby Club. Sadly, I was too young to remember much of it but have certainly heard a lot of the stories! As I got older and made the school teams, he used to come up to watch every game whether it be rain or shine. Unfortunately for him I was in most of the teams that must have been hard work to watch as we were no superstars, but he was there for each one of the matches.

We used to go to a lot of athletic meets with my cousin, Leon, and I could never work out why we would always sit on the bottom bend of the track, that is until I got a bit older and realised we had the best seats in the house for the ladies high jumping – no wonder he was so keen on those trips!

Every outing and holiday with Dad came with a 'will we get there?' caution. Many of you probably know about the infamous vehicles he owned, but it was all part of the fun of the trip – whether we had to park on a hill to bump start it the morning or whether the door or wheel would fall off!

We enjoyed many trips over the years; to Ireland, France, Spain and Sweden. Probably the best was our last visit to Belfast together, just before the Dementia got too bad. We went round all his old haunts and old family homes. Sadly his Mum's grand house next to the sea was no longer there, but yes, Holywood was still grey and overcast! We visited his sister, Carole and had general stupidity with his nieces and nephew. Sadly since then, four years ago, the tears of laughter and joy have turned into those of sadness as we had been able to do less and less together.

As a son, you grow up thinking your Dad is bulletproof, so seeing him deteriorate has been absolutely heartbreaking. So as bad as it was when he finally passed away, at least we knew that he was in peace and free from the Dementia. No doubt he is causing havoc wherever he is now and throwing them feet around.

We would also like to thank all of you for looking out for him over those last few years so we could prolong putting him in a care home for his own safety. Without the community feel around him it would have probably been a lot sooner.

We also hope that you can join us for a few Guinness's and burnt sausages, while we celebrate his colourful life and swap our many memories.

Celebrant

Tim has also asked me, on his behalf, to thank Gina for all the work she put into organising this ceremony – he says she did just about everything.

We've heard about how Gavin was his own man. He was a real character, exasperating at times as Gina says, but underneath it all a very caring person – a gentleman. His humanity shines through everything that Gina and Tim have shared with us. He never had much in material goods, but he had so much in friendship and community, which is worth a whole heap more.

He wasn't a family man in the conventional sense – but he had two special families which were at the heart of his being. Sudbury Court Rugby Club, where he shared so much with his brothers in fortune, was a home from home. And being a father to Tim and to Gina made him immensely happy – and proud.