

A Celebration of the Life of

Anthony (Tony) Bell

23 April 1943 – 17 September 2024

22 October 2024 , The Tim Bobbin Pub, Lillieshall Road
Celebrant: Tamiko O'Brien



Humanist
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Così Fan Tutte: Soave Sia il Vento - Mozart

Sung by Patricia Ninian, Alexandra Dinwiddie and Louis Hurst

Welcome to the Tim Bobbin Pub for this celebration of the life of Tony Bell who died at home on September the 17th at the age of 81. As you will see from your order of service, we have quite a number of contributions for today's tribute to Tony. That reflects Tony's great breadth, for while he wasn't physically wide, he was in every other sense a big person.

As a linguist Tony could read and speak Spanish, French and Italian, with great depth, nuance and accuracy, he also had an impressive grasp of Portuguese, Russian and Arabic - but, as we will hear today, he was fluent in many other languages: the language of athletics, of leadership, of friendship and even of opera.

Raised as a Christian, Tony remained profoundly respectful of religious music but chose to live his life without the framework of a religious faith and was a humanist for over six decades.

I'm Tamiko O'Brien, a Humanists UK accredited celebrant and it's my great privilege to be leading this celebration today. Humanist ceremonies are non-religious and inclusive, they seek to embrace everyone, no matter their philosophy or faith. Here are some words I read two weeks ago at Tony's graveside in *Clandon Wood Natural Burial Ground*. They are written by Dr James Hemming, who was a humanist thinker, psychologist and social activist.

"The meaning of life is to live it, as wholly as we can, as abundantly as we can, as bravely as we can, here and now, sharing the experience with others, caring for others as we care for ourselves, and accepting our responsibility for leaving the world better than we found it."

I chose those words because they so perfectly describe the way that Tony lived his life, abundantly and bravely, leaving the world better for his contribution.

Tony's son Simon has chosen a reading from the *Tempest* to begin our ceremony today.

The Tempest (Act IV Scene I)

*Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.*

By any standards Tony had a difficult and disrupted childhood. His father was a probation officer based in what was then the British Colony of Sierra Leone. Tony's mother became ill with lung cancer when he was eight and Tony together with his parents, his older brother Chris and younger sister Kate travelled by boat to the UK so that his mother could receive specialist treatment.

After staying at relatives in Cheshire for some months, and only barely aware of the seriousness of his mother's illness, at the age of nine, and despite all his prayers, he was told that his mother had died, and he would be going to boarding school in the UK. His father quickly returned to Sierra Leone and Chris and Tony were sent to Lichfield Cathedral School while Kate went to live with an aunt who was a Christian Missionary, Kate soon found herself living on a Mission in India.

Boarding school in the mid-1950s wasn't for the faint hearted but as Tony would later explain he survived it because he was clever, sporty and sang in the choir.

Four years later, having successfully navigated life as a boarder with no family to visit at weekends, he was collected by his father and taken to live with him and his new wife in London.

She was Tony's godmother Beatrice, his own mother's best friend, a strongly religious schoolteacher who probably found it quite challenging looking after young teenagers. Happily, for Tony being clever, resourceful and sporty was once more the answer to surviving his new life at Ealing Grammar where he excelled in his academic studies, rugby and swimming.

On leaving school Tony chose to study Modern Languages at St Andrews University in Scotland where he married Vivien, and they started their family soon after. After graduating Tony was recruited to work at GCHQ in Cheltenham where he worked for two years translating Spanish secrets.

His naturally adventurous spirit then saw the family move to Australia in 1968 where he took up a lecturing post at Monash University, Melbourne. Five years later and Tony, Vivien and their expanding family moved to Kingston, Jamaica, where he had a new post lecturing in Modern Languages and Linguistics at the University of the West Indies.

It was here in 1974 that Tony first met Val and very quickly they recognised a deep and profound connection. It wasn't an easy time since both Tony and Val were married to other people with young families, but after a turbulent period for everyone they all found a way to make it work.

By 1978 this meant moving back to the UK where Tony and Val married and began their life in London. Tony's formidable intellect and 'can-do' attitude meant it wasn't hard for him to establish himself as a valued and important academic, initially at North London Polytechnic. Meanwhile Val's career at St Thomas' Hospital flourished and the two of them successfully juggled family life with academia, research and various adventures, usually in South America.

Today we will enjoy some rare glimpses into Tony's life. Our first insight comes from Tony's daughter Ingrid Reynolds.

Dancing With Dad

Hello, everyone I'm Ingrid, one of Tony's six children. Its lovely to see people from my dad's life, thank you for coming.

My dad's chosen vocations clearly demonstrate his academic prowess, but he was also a very capable athlete. He loved swimming (he swam for Middlesex as a boy) and enjoyed cycling and walking ridiculous distances but what you may not know about him is he was also an amazing dancer. Not in a 'strictly' type way (because he had a very unique style) but in a natural free flowing, feel the music type way.

When I was about eight we took to the dance floor at a party and by the time we finished we'd cleared it and got a round of applause. As a teenager I remember being embarrassed by it but as an adult (and someone who shares his love of dancing) I loved taking over the dance floor with him and my siblings.

We have talked about dad's love of languages, travel, sport and music but his greatest love, above and beyond all of these, was his love for Val, for 50 years he adored her. So, I would like to thank Val for making my dad very happy. Thank you.

Thank you, Ingrid, it's good to add *dancing* to Tony's long list of super-powers. We are now going to hear from Tony's granddaughter Matilda Reynolds:

Remembering Grandpa

Our grandpa. Kind, knowledgeable, influential and wise. A few words I would use to describe him.

Although we lived a fair distance away from each other, we would always have a lovely catch up over email or when I visited him and him us. I would update him on my life, places I'd been and achievements I'd accomplished.

Getting his praise would feel like one of the best medals I could receive, and I was so thrilled when he came to visit me at work earlier this year. He had quite the experience learning all about the future of automotive and for once it was me teaching him!

Last April he celebrated his 80th, I wished him a happy birthday which quoted "You've had 80 laps around the sun and I'm wishing you all the best for another lap filled with lots of adventure and happiness".

His reply to this was "I like the idea of laps around the sun, makes me feel quite dizzy", well Grandpa, you've got unlimited laps of the sun now with hopefully no dizziness and I'm sure there's much adventure to be had wherever your spirit goes.

I will miss telling him of my travels or what I'm getting up to but I know he will be with us all wherever we go and provide a driving force behind all that we do. I will miss his interesting facts, advice and even the times I stood on the platform waving him goodbye on his journey back home to Clapham.

I am beyond proud (as he would be too) of my mum, her siblings and Val for the strength they have shown when going back and forth to care for him while he was sick, be it all happening very quickly. You all keep this family going and on behalf of all the grandchildren, thank you.

So, enjoy your laps of the sun Grandpa and now waving you goodbye on your journey one last time. Until we see each other again, love from me, just as you'd say.

Thank you, Matilda. You described Tony as *Kind, knowledgeable, influential and wise*, and when I met Val in their home of 42 years, a few doors from here, I was taken aback by the number of cards and emails that Val had received. The words *kind, generous, influential and wise* appeared frequently, with former colleagues remembering Tony with so much fondness and gratitude.

That's particularly remarkable because Tony worked in senior leadership roles for a large part of his career. By 1982, at the Institute of Linguists, Tony was quickly promoted from Deputy General Secretary to become General Secretary and from there in 1988 he went to the University of London's Institute of Latin American Studies, as Secretary (to briefly translate that it means he was the Head of the Institute's Academic Administration which is a hugely responsible role).

Leadership didn't make Tony a remote character. Tony managed to encourage a sense of community, team spirit and fun. Even after a merger resulted in a new London University School of Advanced Studies where he became Chief Administrator, he remained committed to an ethos of caring for and respecting every individual's contribution.

Alongside Tony's impressive academic career, he was elected to be a member of council at the Chartered Institute of Linguists. We now have Ann Carlisle their former CEO to tell us about Tony's pro-bono contribution to the Institute.

Tony at the Institute of Linguists

I knew Tony only for a short proportion of his 40 years or so with CIOL, or the Institute, as he would have called it. And over those 40 years he contributed so much at all levels.

Early on he worked with Ann Corsellis, a great dame of the Institute, on the start-up of recognition, training and qualification for public service interpreters. Ann would have very much liked to be here today, but she is sadly not now up to the train travel.

Without Tony, Ann said, it might never have got off the ground and came at a time when some members still referred to non-European languages as "exotic". Things have moved on rather a lot since! As Treasurer, Vice-Chair and Chair of Council (amongst many other roles and committee positions) Tony led – I shall call it the Institute – led the Institute through some turbulent times and through his involvement with the many different facets of the Institute's work he built up a detailed and wide-ranging expertise and knowledge of its affairs.

"Tony will know" was a recurrent phrase I frequently heard in the office throughout my time there. So much so that the Institute turned to him to write the definitive history of the Institute (the little red book) to mark its centenary.

Of course, it was no surprise to me when I went to check Tony's dates as Chair, that the little red book was the very publication I reached for and he was, I'm sure, very proud to have been Chair when CIOL reached its centenary in 2010.

Tony's loyalty to the Institute was exceptional and invaluable as was the quiet way he went about sharing precious advice and lending support to those he worked alongside. I particularly appreciated the time he gave me when I took up the reins as CEO and I always knew that if Tony was in the room, I could count on his support.

What I remember most about Tony was his energy and enthusiasm. The way he would bowl into Council meetings, fresh off his bicycle, waterproof panniers in hand already pulling out the day's papers as he found his spot round the table. When innovations and new proposals were tabled for discussion, Tony was always the "litmus test" – we all knew that if it got past Tony, it couldn't be too bad an idea! But it wasn't all plain sailing. His formidable editing and proofing skills made finalising any document a long and, dare I say it, sometime tortuous process and if anyone could see a flaw in an argument or debate it would be Tony. He could be deadly serious with his attention to detail, but any collaboration, disagreement or debate usually ended with a mischievous grin.

The upside was, that however long it might take you to finalise something, you could pretty sure that the output was always going to be as near as dammit perfect! For that, the Institute has a lot to thank Tony for.

I want to finish with another little book, black and white this time, that Tony sent me. I had just completed a fabulous bike ride from Lands' End to John O'Groats to raise money for the cancer unit of our local hospital and was busy training for a long-planned ride to cross the Alps by bike with a group of friends. When the topic cropped up at work, Tony the cyclist enthusiastically wanted to know all about it, every detail of how it would work, when we were going and which route we'd be taking.

A few weeks before we were due to leave a parcel arrived at the office addressed to me and inside, I found this book and a note. It's a digitalised republication of an original from the historical collection of the British Library and is a diary of a woman in her forties, Elisabeth Robins Pennell, which she had written while crossing the Alps herself in 1898! You can imagine my delight. I was going to be almost half her age again by the time we rode but it was just the motivation I needed to believe we really could do it. I loved the thoughtfulness of the gift and was highly entertained by the read itself, but what I loved even more was the note which came with it – a photo of a bike that was the very same model as Elisabeth's .. which Tony had once owned.

I didn't know Tony well, but it was a gesture that I was extremely touched by and as we toured through beautiful alpine scenery, and when the going got particularly tough, Tony and that book was just the inspiration I needed to keep going.

The Institute is much changed, we now know it as CIOL, but the solid foundations on which it is standing are in no small part, together with others some of whom are here today, thanks to Tony.

As we just heard Tony wasn't just thoughtful and kind, he was also somewhat fearless and completely undaunted by hard work. Tony didn't do anything by half measures, if there was something he believed in and was interested in he would be quite prepared to do some serious heavy lifting.

There were many examples in the emails sent to Val, one former colleague wrote: '*on more than one occasion Tony dealt with a very serious organisational problem quietly, only telling me about it once it had been successfully resolved*'.. Tony wasn't one for making a show of himself, he simply liked to make good things happen.

Val told me that on their various trips to South America it wasn't unusual for Tony to become caught up in solving a very tricky situation for a total stranger. More than one desperate tourist who had their passport or money stolen was lucky enough to benefit from Tony's patience and fluent Spanish.

Meanwhile his adventurous spirit, kind heart and willingness to jump in with both feet saw him variously: chasing house burglars in the middle of the night in Kingston, Jamaica (albeit naked and without a weapon) and running after pickpockets in Lima (this time fully dressed). Meanwhile, one Sunday morning on his way home from swimming, his solution to finding a troubled young man kicking in the window of one of the local shops in North Street was to bring him home for a cup of tea.

We now have some words from Tony's friend Mike Barrett.

My Friend the Renaissance Man

I was lucky to meet Tony through the community choir and to enjoy a growing friendship over the years. We shared our humanist outlook, music, languages and linguistics, and our experiences of living and working internationally. Tony was the perfect mate for a quiet chat over a glass of something, bewailing the frustrations of daily life or political failures at home and abroad, but also finding humour and stimulus from everything imaginable.

Tony was modest in displaying his intellectual and cultural interests, but he passed me his copies of the London Review of Books and there were often annotations on articles covering everything from literature to sociology, history, philosophy and science. He was in every sense a Renaissance man. He was also man of enormous personal integrity, who brought dedication and commitment to all the responsibilities he took on professionally or voluntarily for the community.

In addition to this serious side, however, he had an energetic sense of fun as anyone could see in his performances with the opera. Several people have summed him up perfectly as 'a lovely bloke'. We were privileged to know him, and we miss him greatly.

Mike referred to Tony's volunteer work for the local community and his participation in the Clapham Community Choir. We now have Jo Eliot, also a member of the choir, who is going to introduce us to a recording they made for Tony recently.

Tony and the Clapham Community Choir

I've known Tony since he joined the choir pretty much at or shortly after its founding in 2011. I used to sing alto but for a long time now had been singing alongside him in the, until recently, bijou-sized tenor section.

I don't think it's overstating things if I say that Tony was fundamental to the success and longevity of Clapham Community Choir. He ran the organisation side pretty much single-handedly for many years, keeping us going and in order. He was instrumental in effecting the transition to a new choir director when the founder, Jessie, wanted to move on, getting Adam, our current brilliant leader to take on the role.

But I think it's also fair to say that Tony was not necessarily completely, how shall I put it, "au courant" with popular music culture.... Many is the time we would embark on learning a pop song known around the world, including sheltered tribes in the Amazon forest. We would all go "oh great, we love this one!" and he would turn to me with a bewildered shrug and just say, "I was out of the country..."

But I know he enjoyed singing the two pieces that will be played this afternoon. Locus Iste by Bruckner will be played later and is a more recent addition to our repertoire, but If Ye Love Me by Thomas Tallis is one we have been singing on and off for a number of years. I love them too. I hope you enjoy it.

If Ye Love Me - Thomas Tallis

Recording of the Clapham Community Choir

Tony retired from the *University of London* 18 years ago and he seamlessly transitioned from full-time paid employment to full-time unpaid employment (including working late into the evening and over some weekends)... although somehow, he managed to find time to take up the clarinet as well! Here to tell us about Tony's prolific volunteering is Emma Thomas-Hancock.

Tony the Volunteer

I feel deeply grateful to have the opportunity to say a few words about someone who has left such a lasting impression on so many of us.

Tony was a truly dedicated volunteer, a remarkable friend, and a guiding force in our community.

I want to begin by acknowledging his family, especially Val, for sharing Tony with us during the countless hours he devoted to his volunteering. Tony's contribution to RSVP and Volunteering Matters spans over two decades—though, if our records are unclear, I'm confident Tony could have told us about the exact date with his characteristic precision.

Much of Tony's volunteering was centred around schools, where he served as what we called a 'schools' organiser.' He recruited and supported volunteers from the community to help children with their reading, numeracy, and overall well-being. This was not a paid role; it was something Tony did purely out of passion and a deep desire to make a difference. Through his work, countless volunteers were given the opportunity to contribute, and countless children received one-on-one support that transformed their educational journeys. The importance of that role and the impact Tony had on these children cannot be overstated.

Tony didn't just organise—he inspired, empowered, and supported. Many of the volunteers he guided are here today, and their presence is a testament to the far-reaching impact of his work.

In addition to his schoolwork, Tony also co-chaired the RSVP steering group, guiding us to improve our volunteer engagement. His co-chair, Rosemary, is here today, and I know she'll agree that Tony's dedication was extraordinary. He rarely missed a meeting, never missed a deadline, and took on his responsibilities with such energy and commitment. Together, Tony and Rosemary formed an unstoppable team, ensuring that everything ran smoothly and that no detail was overlooked.

As someone who worked closely with Tony, I can say that he was instrumental in shaping how we approached leadership and strategy at Volunteering Matters. His lived experience as a CEO, his humanist values, and his unrelenting passion for doing things the right way made him a mentor to me and many others.

Tony was always there to hold us accountable, to celebrate our successes, and to challenge us when we could do better. His ability to analyse, reflect, and offer insightful suggestions was invaluable.

Personally, I learned so much from Tony—not just professionally, but also about life. I got to know him through countless meetings, often on screen, and what always stood out to me was his deep love for his family. Tony's pride in Val, his children, stepchildren, and especially his grandchildren, was clear in every conversation we had. His eyes would light up when he talked about their adventures and accomplishments.

Tony had four qualities that I believe defined him:

- 1. **Forensic:** Tony had an unmatched ability to dive deep into the details. Whether it was our paperwork, strategic plans, or processes, he analysed everything with incredible thoroughness. This level of attention transformed the way we approached our work and ensured that we always strived for excellence.*
- 2. **Caring:** Tony was one of the most caring people I have ever met. His kindness extended to everyone he worked with, always taking time to check in and offer support, especially during challenging times. His thoughtfulness was a source of strength for many of us.*
- 3. **Hardworking:** Tony's dedication was extraordinary. I don't think I've met a more hardworking volunteer. He never missed a meeting, was always fully engaged, and empowered everyone around him. His work ethic was nothing short of inspiring.*
- 4. **One-of-a-kind:** Tony was truly unique. Sometimes his passion and determination to dig into the details could be misunderstood as frustration, but it was never about that. It was about care—care for the cause, care for the people, and care for making a difference. He never held back when something needed to be said, and we respected him deeply for it.*

Tony will be missed, but his legacy will continue in all the lives he touched. We are committed to building on the foundation he laid, and we will carry forward the values he lived by—dedication, kindness, and the pursuit of making the world a better place.

To Tony, thank you. Thank you for being so amazing, for your unwavering commitment, for your friendship, and for your care. You have made a difference in more ways than we can ever truly express.

Thank you, Emma, and it's wonderful to know how much Tony's work has been appreciated.

As we grow older its quite normal for the world to shrink a little as we see fewer people and engage less with the hurly burly of life – but Tony's world didn't shrink. As we have heard he was quietly (and consistently) extraordinarily generous with his time and expertise. One more example comes from a letter sent to Val by their former neighbours who quickly became friends and sometime pet-sitters for Marmalade, Tony and Val's tortoise (who has also lived at no 31 for the last 42 years).

Helinä spoke of the great pleasure of having Tony and Val as neighbours and how easy, non-judgmental, understanding and warm they always were. Helinä wrote "Tony had a wide understanding of the world, and never stopped wanting to learn more. He was also generous with his time. Anselm, our eldest, formed a special bond with him.. In Anselm's own words: *"Tony helped me grow as a person, be it him taking time out of his day to tutor me Spanish or helping me with Duke of Edinburgh volunteering with the Clapham Community Choir. I appreciated all of his wisdom"*.

We now have our last speaker for today Patricia Ninian who is going to speak about Tony's contribution to the *St Pauls Opera Clapham* and she will introduce and sing the next piece of music.

Tony and the St Pauls Opera Clapham

I first met Tony when he turned up at St Paul's Church to join the chorus of the St Paul's Opera (SPO) production of Don Giovanni in the spring of 2015, when he played the role of a wedding guest with flowers in his hair.

Obviously this was a successful introduction to SPO as he returned the following year, for the production of The Magic Flute, ready to re-immers himself in the life of an SPO production. Not only did Tony love singing and playing a role, he was also prepared to pull his sleeves up and become just as involved in the back stage activities as well. For most of our productions, Tony was first to volunteer to paint the set, make props, lie on his back screwing together the structure of the hire staging, and absolutely always there to dismantle and pack away at the end of a production.

He took on many guises as a member of the chorus – as well as that wedding guest, he played a vagrant in grubby rags in the Magic Flute, a paparazzo, a heavenly body and a disco babe in Orpheus in the Underworld, a New York cop in Così Fan Tutte, another nuptials guest who moonlighted as a servant in the Marriage of Figaro, a lizard – yes a reptile! – in Cendrillon and a May Day reveller who was entirely dressed in pink for our production of Albert Herring!

There! I think Tony would have been proud of me with this list, keeping going in the style of Just a Minute without repetition, deviation or hesitation.

But now I'll hesitate – or perhaps pause – for a brief moment, to tell you about his finest stage roll with SPO. I'll explain.

It was our first full production following the lifting of lockdown restrictions in 2021. We chose to go back and repeat our first ever opera production of Puccini's Gianni Schicchi to relaunch us.

Because of the restrictions, our performances were staged in the lower church yard at St Paul's Church, to set the scene. In case you don't know the Gianni Schicchi plot, I'll briefly explain. The Donati family gathers, anticipating the imminent death of its patriarch, Buoso Donati. Shortly after curtain up, Buoso literally dies on stage. We needed to find our Buoso. And guess what? Tony volunteered. He played the role with superb panache, lying corpse-like in his hospital-issue bed, and even tolerated certain members of the cast literally climbing over him in an attempt to grab Buoso's will, to check out their gains!

What a star role!

SPO has developed from a one-off production in 2013 to today where we are a registered charity with a full programme of events and concerts running throughout the year, with a Schools' Outreach programme with local primary schools, a growing membership of supporters and an equally impressive roll call of young singers eager to join our ranks to perform in our opera productions, oratorios and concerts.

And of course, this development has happened because Tony put his hand up in the early days and volunteered to be part of the organising fabric of the company. Without Tony's vast administrative experience and attention to detail, we would not be where we are now. In particular, his perseverance and determination were the chief reasons we succeeded in achieving our charitable status, guiding us through a process that is designed to put off all but the most dedicated of applicants. What – or indeed – where would we be without him?

On top of it all – and I know you will all recognise this – Tony was just brilliant company. Whether he was coming to a rehearsal and chatting to all members of the cast, or welcoming the audience as our chief front of house greeter at EVERY concert, attending achingly long committee meetings and still have a joke and a chuckle at the end of proceedings, or welcoming us to his home on summer evenings for meetings, drinking a glass of wine in the garden and introducing us to the legend that is Marmalade the tortoise, Tony was always there with a smile.

I was privileged to see Tony at home a couple of times in his last few weeks. The last time, I had just returned from holiday and the post-vacation blues were kicking in. But it was Tony who cheered me up, telling me how he was enjoying listening to Proms (particularly the one featuring our SPO Patron David Butt Philip, who was singing in the Janacek Glagolitic Mass – (I must say I felt vindicated in my ignorance when Tony admitted, with a chuckle, that even he had no idea where the word 'Glagolitic' came from)! And to the end, he was so keen to hear how SPO was doing and what the future held for the company.

Tony, we at SPO all miss you so terribly. We will never forget you. And – I personally promise – we will make ABSOLUTELY certain of that. Farewell dear friend!

Fidelio: Mir Ist So Wunderbar - Beethoven

Sung by Patricia Ninian, Tanya Hurst, Robin Whitehouse and Louis Hurst

So, we come to the close of our ceremony and we have heard so much about Tony's legacy. His legacy of course lives on in his impressively large and thriving family, but also in the many organisations he has supported and the people he has touched through his work (both paid and unpaid). There are so many things to miss about Tony, not least his singing and the sound of him practising his Clarinet, Val tells me he was progressing really well with it before he became ill.

You will see in the order of service that Tony chose two charities that were close to his heart: The St Pauls Opera Clapham and the Eden Nature Garden. Val has already heard from Philippa Gould CEO of the Eden Nature Garden that they are so grateful for the generous donations they have received so far.

Finally, Val wanted me to thank William Agyei who was Tony's carer for the last eight weeks and the staff at St Thomas' Hospital and the St Thomas' Palliative Care Team who all supported Tony with such professionalism and kindness.

Val also wanted to thank family members and friends who have rallied round to offer their support, she told me about the many acts of kindness – from bags of home baked brownies left on the doorstep, to the many flowers and cards she has received, to two friends who even brought a selection of frozen ready meals.

Now it's time for Val to lead us in a toast.

