

A Celebration of the Life of

## **Alan Richard Smith**

29 January 1948 – 03 March 2025

3 April 2025, Milton Malsor Crematorium, Northampton

Celebrant: Steve Church



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***The Amber Spyglass – Philip Pullman***  
**Read by Zoë**

*Something Dad and I shared and discussed was a pleasure in the writing and philosophy of Philip Pullman and so I want to share this short extract from The Amber Spyglass:*

‘When you go out of here, all the particles that make you up will loosen and float apart. All the atoms that were you will be gone into the air and the wind and the trees and the earth and all the living things. You’ll never vanish. You’ll just be part of everything. You’ll drift apart, it’s true, but you’ll be out in the open, part of everything alive again.’

***People***

Richard grew up in a loving family. His parents, Alf and Joan, and his big brother, Colin, made him feel safe – he often said there was "always someone looking out for me." He also spent time with his cousins at his aunt’s house when his mum was at work.

Richard was utterly devoted to his own family. He loved Phil with all his heart and adored his children, Zoë and Liam. He was fiercely protective of them and later doted on his granddaughters, Erin and Iona. A stroke at 42, when his children were just 3 and 5, and the many health and mobility challenges that followed, never shook his love or commitment. His family were the reason he faced every setback with such strength.

And we shouldn’t forget, Sadie, Zoë’s best friend from school, who became like a second daughter to Richard.

Friends mattered deeply to Richard. His relationship with his best friend from junior school, Jim, was lifelong. He kept close ties with friends from grammar school, work colleagues, and others he met along the way. Even if he didn’t see them often, Richard stayed loyal and thoughtful, remembering things they had shared or taught him.

Richard once told a friend, "Never throw anyone away" – and he lived by that. More recently, he appreciated the friendships formed with new neighbours and at the Residents Club after moving to Grangewood three years ago. His sessions at the Reach for Health gym were as important for the relationships he formed as for their invaluable contribution to maintaining his mobility.

Richard didn’t care much for parties – he preferred one-to-one time – but he planned a Ruby Wedding Anniversary celebration last summer and was delighted to see so many family and friends in one place.

## ***Education and work***

Although he sometimes felt out of place at Northampton Grammar School, Richard made the most of the opportunity. He went on to the University of Nottingham, where he enjoyed life more than lectures but still completed his degree.

He was determined to find a job that didn't involve wearing a suit and tie. But his choice of social work was more than that – it was a reflection of his deep sense of fairness and social justice.

Richard later joined what was then Northampton College of Technology to train social work assistants. The college became Nene College, and later the University of Northampton, as the social work courses developed into full degree programmes. He gained a Master's degree and took a sabbatical year for academic and practical research.

Richard was especially proud of helping to open up social work careers for people who might once have been overlooked. His colleagues saw him as “the intellectual one” – he was passionate, articulate, and always ready to stand up for what he believed.

## ***Politics***

Richard channelled his belief in social justice through the Labour Party. He campaigned, leafleted and argued tirelessly for a fairer world. Even when he could no longer campaign in person, he kept trying to do what he could.

Recently, Richard found world events and climate change deeply troubling, but he never gave up trying to make a difference.

## ***Music***

At age five, Richard was told he was “a growler” and should never sing again – so he didn't. But he had a wonderfully eclectic taste in music, from reggae to Bob Dylan, Irish folk to Beethoven's Choral Symphony, Bruce Springsteen to Bach's Double Violin Concerto. He knew every note of the pieces he loved and was not shy about disliking any version that strayed too far from the original.

## ***Cooking***

Richard was one of life's natural cooks. He had a gift for adapting recipes and created delicious meals – especially rich, hearty winter casseroles to enjoy with a good glass of red wine.

When he could no longer cook, he gave Phil cryptic guidance in the kitchen, saying only, “Well, just put in a bit – till it's just right.”

## ***Gardening***

Richard loved gardening and created a beautiful space in Kingsthorpe over 34 years, especially proud of his thriving vegetable patch. As his mobility declined, he couldn't do as much – but after moving to Grangewood, the adapted garden gave him back the chance to plant and tend from his wheelchair.

### **Travelling**

Richard loved exploring other cultures, learning the history and natural world of each place. His favourite trip was a winter cruise to Norway, where he saw breathtaking scenery, the Northern Lights, and two sea eagles performing an aerial ballet over the ship.

### **The natural world and the power of landscape**

As a child in Delapre, Richard spent hours in the fields and woods nearby. He could still point out where the ponds and paths once were. He collected fossils from the banks of the then-new M1, fished for minnows in the Wootton Brook, watched great crested newts, and took over his brother's den in the grounds of Wootton Hall.

He once rescued an injured wood pigeon, which moved a passing woman to write to the local paper saying it proved modern youth still cared. He later changed his mind when wood pigeons attacked his cabbages – and would always pick pigeon from a menu in revenge.

He loved walking holidays in wild places – the Lake District in winter, coastal paths in Dorset, Cornwall, Wales and Scotland, nature reserves. He always joked that he could smell a pub from five miles away.

He made yearly pilgrimages to see snowdrops, catkins, wood anemones, bluebells, poppies and autumn leaves.

Later, he became fascinated by how landscapes tell stories. With no background in the subject, he studied for a postgraduate certificate in Landscape Archaeology by distance learning – simply to satisfy his curiosity.

### **Final thoughts**

Richard was quiet but deeply passionate about what mattered to him. He showed great strength and resilience throughout his life. He had many talents and interests, a deep love of nature, and above all, an unwavering devotion to his family and friends.

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### **Zoe's tribute**

*When Liam and I were young, we were once in a drama class where a storybook was introduced. When we said we knew it, the teacher asked us how. We breezily announced, 'Oh, Dad read it to us' and the teacher turned to us seriously and said, 'Do you know how lucky you are to have a Dad who reads to you?' That's one of the earliest memories I have of realising that we were indeed very lucky to have a Dad, who not only read to us but read us his most loved and cherished books, 'Brendon Chase', 'The Hobbit', 'The Dark is Rising'; books that instilled in me our shared love for nature and the stories and legends buried in our world.*

*It was this love for nature – admittedly combined with the fact that a friend had announced, "Well, he'll never climb another mountain" – that made Dad so*

*determined to return to it after his stroke and that, on one memorable occasion, led him to set off solo on a long hill walk whilst Mum, Liam and I did a less ambitious walk. After a number of hours, he hadn't returned and we all grew anxious and considered ringing Mountain Rescue. When he finally appeared over the crest of a hill, I joyously ran towards him in a manner familiar to those of you who know the film The Railway Children, as good as shouting, 'Daddy, my Daddy!', leading to this being a popular quote in our house!*

*Dad also took great pride in passing on to me his passion for music, lovingly creating three volumes of 'Zoë's Collection', a great and varied array of music that was important to him. On one occasion, he sat me down with his record collection for me to choose some of my favourites for the next volume. When I chose 'The Ballad of Joe Hill', he proudly said, 'That's my girl!' and I think my political destiny was sealed henceforth!*

*Dad never stopped sharing what was important to us both. Shortly after he had retired, he watched a BBC documentary about Roger Deakin, who revived the practice of 'wild swimming' and immediately thought of it as being something I would love. As soon as it had finished, he walked down to the book shop and bought the book for me, handing it to Mum saying, 'Get this book to Zoë and make sure she watches the film before it's gone!' Wild swimming, of course, became another great love of mine, and still is, seventeen years later.*

*These few examples, of so many I could give, show some of the ways that Dad has inspired and shaped me; in story, in song and in purpose. It's a seam that runs through all I do and all I am and I am proud and grateful for it.*

### **Philippa's tribute**

*When I was young, I was a Girl Guide – something the unclubbable Richard found very amusing. To gain my Campers' badge, I had to build a campfire and light it using no more than three matches – my great pride was to be able to do so with only one. Richard, you will imagine, has frequently pointed out that this skill has not necessarily been my most valuable lesson in life. But the story did lead him to say that the greatest fire in his life – our relationship – needed no matches but was undoubtedly a case of spontaneous combustion.*

*The intensity of those first flames lit up our lives and our souls. We felt as if we and everything and everyone around us glowed brighter in the light of what we felt for each other. The arrival of Zoë on the first day of summer 1985 served only to strengthen the bond. Richard told me that he found himself completely overwhelmed by joy and, unable to drive, had to stand in the hospital car park with his face to the early sun and just bathe in his emotions. With Liam happily completing our family, Richard revelled in being a father and I do not need to explain*

*the impact of that commitment because they have spoken for themselves. Those were ten glorious sunlit years.*

*The random brutalities of life then dealt not just one but quite a number of blows to Richard and thus to our whole family. It would be disingenuous to pretend it made no difference – of course, it did. I'm sure life does come tougher but not a great deal. But Richard never allowed himself to be defined by the constraints imposed on him. He felt that he had been "sold short" but he stubbornly refused to kowtow to illness and disability. We worked together – all of us – and the hard times were counter-balanced by so many that burned brightly. Becoming a Granddad made for fresh joys and his two little girls were the stars of Richard's last three years. His face would light up when Erin burst into the room with a "Good morning, Granddad" or Iona graced him with her slow, wide infectious smile.*

*So that fire I have described may have sputtered and hissed at times but it never went out – we blew on the flames side-by-side and tended the warmth of its glow with care. Almost the very last thing Richard said to me was "I have always loved you" and I know that it doesn't come much better than that. And I will always love him.*

**Poem: Afterwards by Thomas Hardy**  
**Read by Janet**

*When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay,  
And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,  
Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbours say,  
"He was a man who used to notice such things"?*

*If it be in the dusk when, like an eyelid's soundless blink,  
The dewfall-hawk comes crossing the shades to alight  
Upon the wind-warped upland thorn, a gazer may think,  
"To him this must have been a familiar sight."*

*If I pass during some nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm,  
When the hedgehog travels furtively over the lawn,  
One may say, "He strove that such innocent creatures should come to no harm,  
But he could do little for them; and now he is gone."*

*If, when hearing that I have been stilled at last, they stand at the door,  
Watching the full-starred heavens that winter sees,  
Will this thought rise on those who will meet my face no more,  
"He was one who had an eye for such mysteries"?*

*And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom,  
And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,  
Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom,  
"He hears it not now, but used to notice such things?"*