A Celebration of the Life of

# Anthony Challis (Tony)

16 April 1946 – 11 July 2026

18 August 2026, Wilford Hill Crematorium
Celebrant: Rachel Faulconbridge



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Tony was born in Birmingham on 16th April 1946, just after the war, and, although he spent much of his adult life elsewhere, traces of his ‘Brummy’ accent occasionally resurfaced, particularly when he’d had a few drinks!

When he was nine years old, Tony’s mother became an enthusiastic convert to Catholicism. Immersed in that world through an all-boys Catholic grammar school, catechism classes and confirmation, he embraced the faith wholeheartedly. Looking back, he once reflected with characteristic honesty, "*I was very much into it at that point… at sixteen I was a narrow-minded little prig! I really believed in ‘the one above’ who could see everything.*"

As he grew older, however, Tony's inquisitive mind began asking difficult questions. Reading widely, thinking critically and discovering philosophy made him question the certainty he’d once accepted. At the same time, he was coming to understand himself as a gay man, and he found the Church's attitudes impossible to reconcile with who he was. He had some particularly strong views about Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI), who described homosexuality as ‘an abomination.’ He later spoke openly about the profound effect this had on him, describing a period of self-loathing after feeling rejected by the Church because of his sexuality.

Yet Tony never allowed that experience to define him. Instead, it became the catalyst for a remarkable transformation. Encouraged by one of his teachers, a Catholic priest who urged his pupils to question, debate and read everything from Sophocles to Sartre, Tony discovered the writings of Bertrand Russell and began to see the world through a different lens. He later described it as having "*gone through the darkness before the dawn*".

Those experiences shaped the values that remained with him for the rest of his life. He became a Humanist, believing that meaning comes not from divine authority but from the way we treat one another. As President of Nottingham Secular Society, he campaigned for a clear separation between religion and the state, arguing that public policy should be guided by human rights rather than religious doctrine. His aim was never to eradicate religion, but to ensure that no belief system enjoyed undue influence over the lives of others.

The anger he felt at the injustice he had experienced became a force for positive change. Friends remember that Tony believed anger had a purpose, that if people didn't speak out, nothing would ever improve, or as a particularly memorable post card he had put it, ‘Sod Calm and Get Angry!’ Rather than becoming bitter, he channelled his energy into campaigning for equality, social justice and gay rights, determined to make life better for future generations.

Tony's activism stretched far beyond gay rights. He was active in the Labour Party and campaigned on issues including racism, apartheid, social justice and equality. His campaigning dated back to the early 1970s; in 1972 he joined the Bath Gay Awareness

Group, after becoming involved with the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, and in 1973 he attended the second ever Pride march, when this still required considerable courage. He spoke of the fear of being found with a copy of Gay News in his pocket on his way home from the group meetings – and it was stuffed very deep down into his pocket for that reason – and of his experience on that Pride march, which was lined with police, and where he found himself shouted at by national front and religious extremists alike. He compared that with his experiences in the last 10 years on Regent Street, where all were welcome and celebrated – and I'd like to think that Tony and people like him, who were willing to stand up for equality, had a big part to play in that turnaround.

In 1979, Tony became a co-founder of the Gay Humanist Group after Mary Whitehouse inadvertently inspired its creation by condemning an organisation that did not yet exist. They even called themselves 'The Children of Mary' in the early days!

He later became a Humanist wedding celebrant, after conducting 'affirmation ceremonies' for many years, in the times before civil partnerships were possible.

Teaching was central to Tony's life. He taught in Bath in the early 70s, and in Bristol, before moving to Nottingham in 1988 to teach in Mansfield. He cited the popularity of teaching in Bristol and the cost of property as his main drivers for moving 'up North!' During the years of Section 28, when teachers were forbidden from discussing homosexuality positively, Tony became much more than an English teacher. He quietly became a trusted adult for young people who felt isolated or different. His own experiences gave him a deep empathy for pupils who simply needed someone who understood. He also founded Pink Ink, a gay writing group which nurtured local creative talent. He continued to fight "Thatcher" on Section 28 and also on the Poll Tax, marching whenever he could. It's incredible to think that it took until the end of 2003 before Section 28 was abolished – it must have felt like a long fifteen years.

Outside politics, Tony possessed an insatiable curiosity about the world. Theatre, literature, poetry, comedy and art were lifelong passions. Every August he headed to the Edinburgh Fringe, reviewing productions, debating performances and introducing friends to experiences they might never otherwise have discovered. He wrote prolifically, contributing poetry to anthologies and publishing reviews, leaving behind a substantial body of work.

At this point I am going to hand over to Martin, to whom Tony was a father figure and a close friend of some 40 years.

**Martin:**

> *Tony brought people together. That's what he did. Through his poetry, through his politics. And let's face it, through his parties. I recognise a lot of faces in here through Tony's parties. I know some of you met each other at one of Tony's parties.*

*I first met Tony as a very troubled teenager, back in the '80s when "Thatcher" was still in power. It was a very different time then. As an openly gay man who was under 21 at the time, it just added to the confusion. It was difficult. Tony was the first person I met that just sat and listened to me. We would sit up for hours, and we would talk, and talk, and talk. And he never judged. And that father figure that he quickly became... Well, he remained a father figure for my entire life, until just a few weeks ago.*

*He was always on the phone. I miss him very, very much. I'm going to miss those long phone calls. Those long, long phone calls, where we would talk about politics and art and theatre, and ourselves. And we talked about Edinburgh. If Tony were alive, he and I would be in Edinburgh right now. We were planning it. We were going to be seeing lots of shows. And he's not there this year to share it with me. And that feels very strange. I miss him.*

*I've got a lot more to say. I'm going to say it at the gathering at the Broadway Cinema. I know a number of other people want to share their memories of Tony, too. So I've got a lot more to say, and we'll talk about it at the Broadway. Thank you very much.*

Those closest to Tony describe a man whose family was built not only through blood but through friendship. His "family of choice" shared holidays, theatre trips, conversations that stretched late into the evening and countless laughs. The week before his operation, he was at the Lace Market Theatre with Chris watching 'Accidental Death of an Anarchist' which got a great review from him.

He was so generous with his time, knowledge and encouragement, which enriched the lives of everyone around him. He even became affectionately known for one enduring quirk: rarely being the first to buy a round of drinks, despite joking that perhaps he could make up for it after he was gone.

And he had a really distinct and infectious laugh which could fill a room; it was easy to tell when he was nearby. It had the added bonus of always reminding Sylvia of her Dad (Tony's brother) whenever she heard it; they had the exact same laugh. How wonderful, to be remembered for having a fabulous laugh.

Having been published in very many anthologies, Tony finally got around to publishing a book of his poetry: 'Rainbow Candles.' It's been described as a mixture of the celebratory and the sombre and contains sections called 'Heart', in which he explores LGBT+ themes, 'Tongue', where he looks at life with tongue firmly in cheek, and 'Hands', where themes range from Victorian fossil-hunters to concerns about the environment. You can find it for sale in Five Leaves in Long Row.

I'm now going to hand over to Andrew who will read Tony's poem 'Tribal Hymn' and then to Anthony for a bonus poem which isn't in your Order of Service, but in which I'm sure you'll all recognise Tony's voracious book-buying habit!

**Andrew:**

*I know Tony was really thrilled when he had his collection of poems published. And I was lucky enough to go along to the book launch, which was held in Beeston Library. It was amazing to see Tony performing his poems. He really came alive, and he really did perform them. It wasn't just reading, but he performed each one. So I've just picked one poem, which comes from the first section of the book. And I'm going to read this one and then I will hand over to Anthony, who will read a 2nd poem. The poem I've chosen is called Tribal Hymn.*

***Tribal Hymn***

*Glory be to the forest and to the many branches*
*discreetly standing guard.*
*Glory be to those in the woodland shade, writing by candlelight,*
*passing on the history of the tribe.*
*Glory be to those stretched out beneath the old oak,*
*reminiscing on the days of the struggle,*
*on the police raids, the abuse hurled,*
*on the long marches beneath the flag.*
*Glory be to the pacing peacocks with wool rug chests.*
*Glory be to those at lamplit tables, chuckling, glasses clinking.*
*Glory be to the shorn hair and the plaid shirts as laughter rises*
*and golden whisky glistens in the lamplight.*
*Glory be to the boys in black shorts and muscles,*
*thinking they know it all,*
*earwigging from group to group,*
*drinking in the knowledge of the tribe.*
*Glory be to the fluorescent drag divas, sweeping down*
*the many pathways, waving, laughing, singing,*
*chucking the chins of the wide-eyed*
*muscle boys and whispering bright news in their ears.*
*Glory be to the contented chatter rising like a murmuration*
*through the leaves to the canopy.*

**Anthony:**

*This is a slightly lighter poem in its tone. The character in the poem reminded me very much of Tony himself. It's about a rather indecisive chap, who can't quite make his mind up whether to buy another book or not. Of course he does, as you can imagine.*

*And if you ever went to Tony's house, and I'm sure many of you have been in Tony's house, you'd know what a perilous process it was to edge around the piles of books and papers. I've been to parties where the books have the best seats. We were bringing in chairs from the garden or sitting on the floor, whatever, and everywhere, all around you, paper, books, and so on. I understand*

*these are beginning to be tidied now, Martin tells me, but every time you went, there seemed to be more.*

*Well, the proliferation of books and paper really did testify to Tony's great delight in the written word. And so, too, did he delight in welcoming people to this house, even though he didn't make room to sit down. He loved giving parties. He loved welcoming people. And it seems to me, in this poem, we see something of Tony there. It's a short poem. I suspect it was written as a challenge to write a poem in a particular form. A villanelle, I think it is. So here we go. It's called Bibliophilia.*

***Biblophilia***
*He thought to order a bright new book*
*It would add to an impressive display;*
*No matter there were books in every nook.*

*He squashed volumes upright – to improve their look.*
*Should he sell some? – there were costs to defray.*
*He pondered his order for the bright new book.*

*He carefully touched a tall pile that shook.*
*Lose these? Oh, which treasures to cast away?*
*Never mind that there were books in every nook.*

*He looked at the ad. again and his hands shook.*
*Other books intrigued; for all, money to pay.*
*He filled out the order form for his bright new book.*

*He knew his alarm would defeat any crook.*
*His locks kept the intruders at bay.*
*He smiles – safety for his books in every nook.*

*New books deserved a party; he would cook.*
*He'd show them off, friends would shout hurray.*
*He posted the order for the bright new book.*
*No matter there were heaps in every nook.*

Tony remained active and engaged until the very end, and was surrounded by the love of friends and family in his final days.

**How do we sum up Tony?**
Let me start by sharing a quote from Andrew Copson, the Chief Executive of Humanists UK, who said:

*'Tony was a wonderfully warm, principled, and dedicated humanist whose activism spanned decades of immense social progress. From his courageous*

*participation in London's second-ever Pride march to his pioneering work as a humanist celebrant and his late-life poetry, Tony lived his values with joyful resilience. He was a pillar of LGBT+ Humanists, and he will be sorely missed*.'

He had recently returned from the Humanist UK conference in Bournemouth and was looking forward to sharing his insights with everyone at one the monthly Nottingham Humanists coffee mornings. Alison, one of the Nottingham Humanists, recalled:

*'I went to last year's conference with [Tony], shared a lovely drive there and back. I recently went to see Uncle Vanya at the Lace Market Theatre and was delighted to find my seat was next to his! Very lucky for me as he explained the plot and themes. He was a lovely, generous person; I'm sad he's gone.'*

Tony was a cherished and enduring presence in Nottingham's poetry community for many decades. He will be remembered not only as a gifted poet, workshop leader and performer, but as someone whose kindness, generosity and quiet encouragement touched so many lives.

I have a couple of quotes from the Nottingham Poetry community to share:

*'I didn't really know him personally, but lived near him and so admired him for reversing the trend of making front gardens into car parks - and instead had the concrete taken away and created a beautiful flower bed for people and pollinators to enjoy.'*

*'Kind calm and caring. The poetry scene will truly miss Tony. Sleep well, sir. Goodnight.'*

Those who knew him speak of a man who was warm, calm, caring and genuinely welcoming. He made people feel seen and supported, and his encouragement helped countless poets find their voice. His talent was admired, but it was his gentle nature and generous spirit that people remember most.