

A family tribute to Geoffrey Gilling-Smith

Geoffrey (Robinson 1968-73) passed away last year. Here are the speeches by his father Dryden and sister Carole (White House 1976-78) at the funeral



Geoff – a man of many talents. (Centre) Getting to grips with gliding in the RAF at Epsom. (Right) Geoff (centre, front row) was very talented at shooting and captained the team that won the Ashburton Shield

Celebrating Geoffrey

A family tribute read at Geoffrey Gilling-Smith's funeral on 29 January 2010

Read by Dryden Gilling-Smith, Geoff's father:

In wishing Geoffrey God speed in his journey to that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns, Carole and I would like to begin by telling you something of the boy who would grow to be the man you all knew and love. Others I am sure will cover Geoffrey's later life and work.

I am very pleased to see Professor Averill Mansfield, past President of the Royal College of Surgeons, with us here today. Geoffrey was, I know, deeply grateful to Averill for the help and guidance she gave him at various critical stages in his career. I am also very grateful to Carole and Lynda for being with our son during his final hours and to the expertise of the cardiac team at the Liverpool Heart

and Chest Hospital who tried so hard to save his life.

Read by Carole Gilling-Smith, Geoff's sister:

My brother and I often returned to our childhood home in Tadworth in Surrey where we had many lovely memories. We were very lucky in that my parents never moved house so that through our adult lives Tadworth became a special place of gathering, celebration and reassurance. Birthdays, passing exams and degrees, engagement parties, my wedding, christenings, my parent's golden wedding anniversary and the last big gathering, my father's 80th. All these occasions and many others were always celebrated in true style with a wonderful French meal cooked by my mother and fine wine chosen by my father.

French was our home language and our discussions were always accompanied in true Latin form by plenty of gesticulations

which amused those of you here who shared our family times since these were, as Lynda and my husband Stephen will vouch, often the only clue as to what was being discussed.

As we married and had our children the gatherings became larger. Lynda, Stephen, Geoffrey's children and our children all noisily entertaining their proud grandparents. Last weekend we gathered as a family again and as my father and I sat down in this wonderful childhood home and wrote this tribute, we felt a great emptiness. Geoffrey had always been a huge presence, larger than life, and affected everyone he came into contact with. On this occasion there was no music; a habit Geoffrey always had when coming home was to adorn the house with his jazz improvisations on my parent's Grand Piano.

There was no smell of cigars or half completed Sudoku puzzles on the couch. As we sat however, we gradually became enriched by the many wonderful memories we had of my brother and wrote this tribute as a celebration of everything he had given us to remember and which we now want to share with you.

Geoffrey was born on 15 November 1955 at Hyde Park Corner, or more precisely the old St. George's Hospital. His maternal language was French, but he picked up all the English he needed to know from a succession of childminders, one of whom was German and from whom he acquired the habit of saying "Ya, Ya" whenever he picked up the phone.

My mother was head of the Physics and Chemistry Department at the French Lycée in South Kensington and my parents lived in a block of flats nearby. Geoffrey used to be fascinated at this early stage in his life

at the milkman's horse eating out of a nosebag, as he later became fascinated watching any animal, insect or bird that came into his field of vision.

He became very articulate at an early age in both French and English and what's more, developed an intuitive understanding of the modes of thought and world picture encapsulated in any language and which I think helped him in later life to understand and relate to people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds throughout the world.

His language skills were honed at the age of three and a half when his maternal grandmother, who knew no English and considered it too late in life to start learning, retired and came to live with us. By then my parents and Geoffrey had moved out of central London to our family home in Tadworth. *Geoffrey thoroughly enjoyed the status of translator as the village grocer sent his assistant round on a bicycle each week to get the grocery orders, as was the custom in the late 50s, or interpreting the conversations of the milkman or the French onion man who regularly visited complete with bicycle, striped shirt and beret.

He was also creative in coining words and expressions that have remained in currency ever since. At 18 months his French grandmother was trying to teach him to say Grand-maman, which he thought would be better served by the term "Gran-Gran", by which she became known for the rest of her days.

Geoffrey had boundless curiosity. At his Prep school he was known as Mr Why. Not all of his questions were easy. Sometimes he answered them himself. One evening after seeing a film he asked his father "What's doctrine?" and before he could reply, Geoffrey continued "I suppose

it's what you learn at university if you go there to become a doctor". On another, he asked "Why do they plant people when they die?" Reminiscing on his early childhood my father recalls one notable other characteristic. Most parents have difficulty keeping small children quiet in church. Before he was two, Geoffrey used to sit in his own baby chair at the end of the row in Brompton Oratory, fascinated by what went on, the high vaulted arches and the music.

My parents received many compliments on how well they had brought up their son, but as all those of you with children know from experience, parental influence over child behaviour on such occasions can often be minimal. It was similar in restaurants. When he travelled in my parents' Morris Minor down to Bordeaux he loved sitting in the company of grown-ups for his evening meal and listening in to what they had to say.

Geoffrey always showed quick wit and repartee. At four years old, a childhood friend boasted to him "I can count to a hundred." Geoffrey, completely non-phased, replied calmly "one hundred and one, one hundred and two, one hundred and three". He had made his point, and there was little more to be said. He did not suffer fools gladly.

I arrived on the scene when Geoffrey was four and a half and he was always my 'big' brother. He was a huge presence in my life and I always followed his lead. One of my earliest memories was of him operating on my doll, lying helplessly in her cot. He was probably performing some intricate surgery, wearing face mask, hat and stethoscope and I as his theatre assistant, dressed in a nurse's uniform, would stand at his side at his side following

his every move. I think he had already set his heart on becoming a surgeon at this early age.

Things developed and he became more and more fascinated by the various animals which inhabited our garden. It was at this point that I stepped down as his surgical assistant as he took things to the next level, meticulously exposing the anatomy of various worms, mice and squirrels (I was very squeamish in those days) or made my father turn white during Sunday lunch as he cut open and then described the various parts of the chicken's heart.

Geoffrey was born with a co-arcuation of the aorta and just before he was 11, this was surgically corrected by Mr Drew at the Westminster Hospital, preceded by a number of tests, including the insertion of a catheter in his left arm when he was fully conscious and no doubt taking in all the details and asking questions.

At 12 and a half Geoffrey won the top day boy scholarship to Epsom College, which paid all his school fees. Epsom College was founded in the 19th century with the aim of providing an education for sons of doctors. While he was at Epsom he developed a number of his other talents. He painted landscapes and portraits from an early age, many of which still adorn the walls of our house.

He had learnt to play the piano by ear as he became impatient being taught formally by his grandmother. In Le Touquet, where we spent our summer holidays, he used to sit down in bars and cafés and play popular jazz tunes impromptu to great applause. He also learnt the electric guitar and in later life, the saxophone. At one stage he spoke of making a career running his own pop group called 'Little Geoff and His Tummy Rumlbers', regularly rehearsing

at home in our front room to the despair of our neighbours.

By 15 his passion for motorbikes and other vehicles began. He spent nearly a year pulling to pieces and reassembling an ancient Matchless with side-car. At midnight on the day he turned 16 he took my poor mother in the side-car and spent over two hours driving around the neighbourhood with my father nervously driving behind him. A few months later he said to my mother "If I get all my A levels can I have a Norton Commando?" Of course she had no idea what a Norton Commando was and blithely said "Yes", but blanched when she saw this monstrous machine.

This was a frightening period in all our lives. On a number of occasions the phone would ring at 2am and it was Geoffrey from a call box saying he had run out of petrol and my poor father would get out of bed, take the two-gallon can in the garage to the nearest 24-hour petrol station, fill it up and take it to where he was stranded. However annoyed my parents might have otherwise felt, there was such a huge sigh of relief that he was alive and safe that there could be no recriminations, and Geoffrey knew he was forgiven.

Fortunately, he moved of his own volition at 17 towards the desire for a small motor car – a Triumph Herald – because I don't think my parents could have persuaded him to abandon his original ambition to become a motorcycle racer. As many of you will know, Geoffrey continued his great passion for sports cars throughout his life, following closely the Formula circuit and enjoying the thrill of driving fast cars.

One of Geoffrey's other talents was shooting. In his Prep school days he used to amass a string of trophies at the Derby

Fair each year as he effortlessly hit the bull's-eye time and time again, to the exasperation of the poor woman who ran the stall. At Epsom he became Captain of Shooting and led his team to win the Ashburton Shield in the National Schools Championship of 1973.

In his gap year on leaving Epsom he spent part of his time helping my father to build up his company. He showed an immediate flair for all the practical things involved in setting up an office, sorting out the telephone system, as well as helping on the technical side. As a mathematician with flair, he could size up what needed to be done and organise the work and calculations much more quickly than the plodding actuary who was supposedly in charge and who naturally resented a school-leaver showing him quicker and easier ways to do his job.

At 21, Geoffrey joined the Board of my father's company as I did later, because my father wanted us both to understand the business should we need to step into his shoes at any stage. In later life, Geoffrey was involved in many companies which he helped to establish and used to say from time to time that there is no easier way to learn how to run a business than being involved in a family company.

Although my brother's various anatomy demonstrations in the garden had put me off a medical career, I discovered to my surprise during my first term at Cambridge, where I was reading natural sciences, that somewhere deep down I shared my brother's passion for medicine.

Geoffrey was a casualty officer in Ealing Hospital at the time and took the sensible step of letting me spend a day with him to make absolutely sure I was ready for the challenge, and it was this and many long

chats with him that helped me decide to switch to medicine, a decision I have never regretted.

Geoffrey had always been very protective of me as his younger sister and as I pursued a career in Obstetrics & Gynaecology, he was always there to give me sensible, unbiased advice, such as which jobs to go for or who to go and see before an interview and how to best present my CV. I know I learnt as much from his mistakes as from his successes and as a result had an easier time of it than he had. When for example I was struggling to write up my MRCOG case book, he introduced me to the wonders of the Apple Mac in the days when computers were incomprehensible ugly beasts. Our paths crossed when we were both SRs at St Mary's Hospital which caused havoc for switchboard – it was not uncommon for him to get the call about an ectopic and I the suspected ruptured aneurysm.

As we became consultants, we often shared our frustrations over the long hours, inadequacies of the NHS and unpleasant politics as well as the positives of our careers, in particular the academic aspects. It was a huge boost to his self-esteem to get a national award last year and I was so proud of him. It was a just reward for years

of hard work and dedication.

His appointment to Council at the Royal College was another well-earned reward and he thoroughly enjoyed this work, which also provided a regular excuse to visit his parents as he travelled down to London. For all the pride, love and admiration his parents had for him, Geoffrey had equal pride, love and admiration for his mother and father, recognising the many opportunities they had given him throughout his life.

Before I conclude I would like to thank all those who cared for Geoffrey in his final days, notably his cardiac surgeon, Mr Oo. He and his team worked night and day doing all in their power to save him and I am sensitive to how traumatic it must have been for them to care for their colleague in this way. Lynda and I are particularly grateful to have been allowed to stay on the intensive care unit at Geoffrey's side right until the very end.

God endowed Geoffrey with many talents and he used these gifts to the full in his personal and professional life and shared his knowledge and experience worldwide. My big brother was a very special person, a huge personality with deep down a heart of gold who touched all who knew him. I am so proud to have been his sister.
