

Celebrating Geoffrey Gilling-Smith's life

Geoffrey Gilling-Smith (Robinson 1968-73) passed away in January last year. Here are tributes from two friends at Epsom, Jim Baxter and Nick Carr

Jim Baxter (Fayrer 1972-74)

Three short vignettes from a short but oh so full life

Preamble

Ezra Lawrence Geoffrey Dryden Gilling-Smith. This is Geoff's full name, or at least the name I first heard when I was beginning to get to know Geoff. The name quite intrigued me, as did the person, but I can certainly understand why he shortened it later on! At first he seemed somewhat arrogant, shy, aloof and proud all at the same time. Did I mention he also had a cheeky smile? Well he was a bit of an enigma. All macho leather jacket, Norton Commando 750 superbike, karate, jazz piano, hats and scarves. Geoff seemed to thrive on being seen to be different.

Did I mention yet that he was half French? Even if you only knew him for a short time you would know that, sooner rather than later. But I digress.

I met Geoff at Epsom College aged 16, when I started there as a boarder. He was a day boy, which meant he got to sleep in his own bed at home and do things he wanted to do outside in the real world. How did I get to know him in the first place? Well, I remember getting to know him as being a gradual thing, as Geoff always seemed so busy outside school with motorbikes, open top cars, other fast cars, boogie music and of course hats and scarves. He was Steppenwolf, Gerard Depardieux and James Dean all rolled into one easy-going smiley package.



A recent photo of Geoffrey and during his Epsom days, with a beloved motorbike

Perhaps I got to know him because my background seemed to interest him. I was Scottish, which seemed to be a good thing in his eyes, had an exceedingly lovely girlfriend, I'd lived in the USA, and my parents then lived in Italy.

Now Italy wasn't France, and thus the food didn't compare, so that didn't really cut the Dijon with Geoff but you get my drift. Which reminds me, did I tell you that I have never known a slower eater than Geoff? How is it possible that he managed to eat all that ultra-cold food? Or eat so late at night without getting indigestion? I guess this food behaviour did him good stead when he was doing his house jobs in hospital.

By the way, you can do what you like to Geoff but you can never take the boy away. It's always there. Perhaps I was lucky in that he felt comfortable showing me the boy in the man. I think this trait was linked to his compassionate, caring side. Geoff generally tried not to show it but he was a real honest to goodness, out and out, platinum-plated softie. Anyway, by the time we were 18 we were almost very good friends and shaping up to get into Medical

School, which brings me to Scene 1:

Scene 1

Geoff, Nick Carr and I met up down a local pub for a drink on a disco night. Little did we know that we had been seen by another drinker there, the Deputy Head of Epsom College. The next day we were summoned into his study and offered two options – take a bare bottom beating or he would report us to the Headmaster. Yes, we thought he was there also, but he did have the upper hand as it were. Although we were legally allowed to drink as we were over 18, it was clearly against school rules. Nick and I were School Prefects and Geoff was a House Prefect, so the latter course would have meant the embarrassment of defrocking from these posts and even suspension in the run in to our A levels. We all took the beating and this seemed to cement our relationship from that point onwards.

Scene 2

During our first year at Medical School, Geoff and I shared a room in a flat in Parsons Green and then later on the Earls Court Road. Our flatmates were three student speech therapists, so there was always someone around to go out for a drink and compare alcohol-fuelled silly voices with.

Geoff had taken up wearing his karate outfit around the flat, and could often be seen impressing our fellow flatmates with his high kicks and smooth rat-a-tat punching routines. Until one day he tried to close an internal Georgian style multi-paned glass door with a carefully aimed kick. Well, that was at least his intention. The reality was that he put his foot through one of the glass panes and then brought it

back through at great speed, karate style, gashing his leg badly in the process.

I didn't have a car, and wasn't insured to drive Geoff's, so I had to call an ambulance. Imagine his embarrassment when the ambulance took him to the Charing Cross Hospital, where he was a medical student.

This embarrassment was compounded when the very doctor that stitched him up in casualty was his own anatomy tutor! Geoff brazened it out by refusing to have any local anaesthetic. I think he was trying to punish himself for his mistake, or perhaps he was just being macho....Needless to say, Geoff's forays into exuberant karate displays waned somewhat from that point onwards.

Scene 3

Geoff and I weren't the best at studying for exams. It was always crammed in at the last minute. Inevitably, we both failed subjects that first year and had to take re-sits. After the last day of these re-sits, we went out and celebrated and ended up talking all night on our balcony in the flat on the Earls Court Road.

As we watched dawn breaking he said "Would you like to go to France for a few days?" I said "Yes, why not?" It took me a few minutes to realise that he meant then, that minute.

By eight o'clock that morning, we were in northern France heading for Le Touquet in his red open-topped MGB. Needless to say we had a great time, as Geoff was in his element.

These three scenes aren't meant to have any hidden meaning, or agenda, they are just to give you an idea of my insight into the boy in the man.

Reprise

What remains to be said is perhaps the obvious but I would very much like it said. I will miss Geoff terribly. I loved him as the brother I never had. He and [his wife] Lynda were kind, generous and supportive when I needed them most. He made me laugh and he made me calm. He came and played Saxophone like a maestro at my wedding. He was truly one of a kind, who will never ever be forgotten.

Nick Carr (Robinson 1969-73)

I didn't want to be Geoffrey's friend, I felt intimidated by him. He was the year ahead of me at school, he was much older than me (a full nine months, which was a lot at that age), he spoke fluent French. He was also the only person I knew who not only had a hyphenated surname but who had four given names. No wonder I was intimidated.

Ezra Lawrence Geoffrey Dryden Gilling-Smith. I once asked him where all the names came from. Ezra I gathered, was his confirmation name, Dryden was the name of his father's favourite poet. When we shared a house together, I would sometimes yell at him in my worst mock Jamaican accent, "Ezra, where you been?" Maybe that's one of the reasons he chose to excise 50% of his appellations, to become just Geoffrey Lawrence; a rare example perhaps, of Geoffrey choosing to have less of himself out there on public display...

But I had no choice. We were thrown together as the only two students in our house at Epsom College who were attempting Oxbridge. Geoff approached me

before the Oxbridge term and said: "Since we're going to work together, we'd better have a holiday together." I was too taken aback to say no, and soon found myself wandering around the French countryside with this amazing guy, having my first taste of fresh sweetcorn he had liberated from a nearby field and smoking my first un-tipped Gauloise. What I discovered, apart from the nausea induced by strong tobacco on a naive stomach, was that far from being intimidating, Geoff was a warm, compassionate, fascinating person. He was also enormous fun.

We went on numerous holidays together. He took me on my first skiing trip and in typical Geoffrey fashion, told me that lessons were unnecessary, he could teach me everything I needed to know. True to his word, within half a day we were flying down the pistes, terrorising the locals. To this day I credit Geoffrey with my love of long fast runs, seeking out moguls for good airtime, and my complete lack of technique.

Geoff bought his first house in Ealing, where Sally and I rented rooms for several years. He was a wonderfully tolerant landlord, allowing us to throw spaghetti at the kitchen wall to see if it was done – I don't know if you've ever done this but when pasta is not yet properly cooked, it sticks.

The thing is, if you then don't take it straight off the wall, it sticks like glue, dries, shrinks and pulls the paint off. Geoff's kitchen walls bore the scars of many strands of undercooked pasta but he never complained. He also never complained if Sally or some visiting girlfriends walked around only partially clad. He really was a very tolerant chap.

It was my enormous honour to be Geoff's best man when he married the wonderful

Lynda. Here was one of those rare people who could match him for wit, joie de vivre and sheer downright bloody obstinacy.

Geography unfortunately forced us apart, by which I don't mean his move to Liverpool but mine to Melbourne, Australia. We saw each other occasionally but we're blokes, so correspondence was sporadic. I last saw him in 2006, and I will always regret not having had the chance to see him or speak to him before the tragic events that led to his death.

Geoff, you were unlike anyone else I've ever met. You would hammer out rock 'n' roll on the piano while I sang along, loudly

and off key. You were fun, funny and unpredictable. You couldn't just get a dog, you had to get a Briar, an enormous hairy thing that looked like a cross between a wolfhound and a musk ox. And not just one, but two of them. So Geoffrey.

The world will be a poorer place without you, but I have wonderful memories no one can take away and photos in my album that I will always treasure. One shows us together in French berets, you holding a string of garlic and looking like you run a charcuterie. As you would have said, merveilleux.
