

Tribute to Nigel Elliott

Nigel was born in Orsett, Essex in May 1950 to Gwen and Ron.

One of four boys, he had a privileged upbringing, thanks to Ron's successful accountancy business.

He attended boarding school – first at Hollingbury Prep School, and then at Haileybury.

While these times away from home were not always remembered fondly, they did instill in him his great love of history and of classical music.

One favourite history teacher in particular – Mr Sabine – can take much of the credit here: the sound world of Mahler wafting from his room to the dormitories, providing lifelong inspiration.

Nigel's time at boarding school also established some of his more prosaic characteristics.

A love of rice pudding, in all its subtle variations.

A penchant for routine – some of which never died – the same number of baths a week, no more, no less.

But perhaps most surprising, real skill with an air rifle, which was presumably honed during his brief time in the Combined Cadet Corp, but lay dormant until one summer at a caravan park in Yorkshire 35 years later, where it immediately won him the respect of the more traditionally macho dads at the shooting range.

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At times during his youth, Nigel also revealed himself to be a true adventurer.

Sailing trips with his family mainly focused on the Thames Estuary, but also ventured as far as Sweden and the Netherlands.

More amazing still was his overland trip from Essex to Pakistan, via most of Europe, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Khyber Pass.

To someone who mainly knew him as a mild-mannered and eminently sensible grown-up, tales of weeklong bus journeys through Middle Eastern deserts were scarcely believable.

And yet he always delighted in sharing his experiences, not least during a treasured holiday to Turkey decades later, where he excitedly showed Mum and I his favourite spots in Istanbul.

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After Haileybury came seven years studying history at Trinity College, Oxford – first for an undergraduate degree, and then for a research master's focused on the Catholic recusants in 17th-century Essex.

These were very special years for my father, largely shared with his brother Roger.

He indulged his intellectual passions to the maximum, made lifelong friends, and clearly fell in love with the city and its dreaming spires.

Throughout his life he returned regularly to Oxford with my mum – for dinners at Trinity, Christmas shopping on the High, and exhibitions at the Ashmolean Museum.

Indeed, their visits to Oxford were an essential part of the preparation for any foreign holiday – for how could one possibly show one's face at the Egyptian Museum of Cairo or the National Museum of Iran without having first reviewed the relevant section of the Ashmolean?

In later years, when health issues and Covid restrictions curtailed foreign travel, the Ashmolean continued to provide a valuable window to the wider world, and it is fitting that his last trip away from London included a pilgrimage to this treasured haunt.

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After Oxford came social work training at Exeter University, and then the big move to London.

The story of how he met my mother is a classic "meet cute."

They had both applied for probation officer vacancies in East London, and were being interviewed the same day.

He arrived two hours late, in a borrowed suit that was clearly too big.

And yet despite these atrocious first impressions, he and my mum were the only two people to get the job.

He must have given a truly amazing interview.

A courtship followed – flamed by a shared love of Greek architecture, landscape, and food – and they were married in Leeds in 1981.

Like their first meeting, their wedding also had elements reminiscent of a rom com, as the church was almost completely buried in a freak April snowstorm.

The traditional trappings of married life duly followed: a terraced house in Walthamstow, and a beautiful baby boy.

I was not only beautiful but also devoted: if Dad needed some time to work in the study at home, he apparently had to go through the whole rigmarole of getting ready for a day in the office, putting on shoes and coat, and leaving through the front door – before sneaking back in once I was convinced he had gone.

If he was lucky, my mum would sneak him a coffee!

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After twelve years as a probation officer, Nigel secured a job as a social work lecturer at Croydon College, and we all moved to Coulsdon, at which point the connection with St Aidan's school and church began.

After a few years he returned to practice as a probation officer in Croydon.

And his final job was as Senior Lecturer and Course Director in social work at Kingston University.

During this time, he continued his research in probation and social work, and obtained his PhD from Kingston in 2006.

When he retired from Kingston in 2010, the esteem with which he was held by his colleagues became clear.

We dug out his retirement card, and the following words all appeared multiple times:

Wisdom, Integrity, Commitment, Kindness.

I think anyone who knew Nigel can concur with that assessment.

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Unsurprisingly, his scholarly pursuits continued during retirement.

He became heavily involved in GAPS – bear with me on this – the Group for the Advancement of Psychodynamics and Psychotherapy in Social Work – for which he was a trustee and treasurer.

He was also a trustee and book review editor and writer for a leading social work journal.

And he threw himself back into history as a member of the Bourne Society, a local history group for which he wrote three books, including his magnum opus on the aristocratic Byron family of Coulsdon.

Retirement also gave further opportunities to cultivate his love of travel and exploration, as he and my mum enjoyed grand tours of Central Asia, Iran, Japan, Hong Kong, the US, Jordan, and of course much of Europe.

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So what was Nigel like as a person and especially as a father?

He was sociable but quiet – always wanting to hear from the other person, but willing to step in to gently correct any historical – or moral – misstep.

He was unfailingly patient, and had an understated but clear way of expressing himself.

When I was nattering away too much on one of our many long walks in the Surrey countryside, he could sometimes be heard to suggest that “perhaps we could enjoy some quiet time now, David.”

If as a learner driver I swung out perilously from a side road, he would keep his cool but note that “you probably should have stopped there.”

The only time he ever really lost his patience was at Crystal Palace matches, where he would wait for the cries of “the referee’s a so-and-so” to subside before calling out authoritatively: “discipline on the field!”

Most of all, he always saw the best in others, and was incredibly generous with his time, his energy, and his ear.

Over the last few weeks, there have already been many occasions when I have come across interesting things that I would like to show him or tell him, but have had to catch myself.

I – and I am sure many of us here today – will miss him very much.

Thank you.

David Elliott

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