

Account of Purley on Thames

Remembering Tom Robinson 1919-2005

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Tom attended the inaugural meeting of Project Purley in 1982 and became its first treasurer.

He led the oral history group and the conversations that the group recorded ensured that characters such as Dan the Lavatory Man and Cally, the master of tall stories are not forgotten. Tom also gave an excellent talk about his father.

Some months after we moved to Purley in 1984, Tom asked if I would be willing to be nominated as Project Purley treasurer. The Project Purley financial records were in a meticulous state and taking over from Tom with his gentle humour was a pleasure.

Tom's funeral, attended by a large crowd of family and friends, was a unique occasion that I am certain Tom would have thoroughly enjoyed. It started with a recording of Paul Robeson singing Old Man River. Then there was a humorous French song that Tom used to enjoy singing and at the end we all sang Jerusalem.

Mickie, Tom's wife, has kindly allowed us to reproduce the tribute to Tom that was read out at the funeral.

Ben Viljoen

Tom was an unassuming character, a peace-loving man, quiet, reticent – never pushing his views and opinions on anyone. But he was a deep thinker with his own philosophy and perception about the state of the world.

He was born in Cranleigh, Surrey, the youngest of five children, to artist William Heath Robinson and his wife Josephine, and enjoyed a privileged upbringing, attending a good public school. There he received a classical education, but he always regretted not studying more science, for he was deeply interested in astrophysics.

He also loved languages, and at the age of 17 spent 4 months with a family on the outskirts of Paris, polishing his French, before taking up employment with the Prudential Insurance Company back in London.

Tom was conscripted into the army and served for the whole of World War 2. He was very involved on the European front, guarding the bridge of Nijmegen after the Arnhem landings, and escorting prisoners of war back to their homelands when war ended.

He rarely talked of his wartime experiences in later life, but would occasionally recall an incident which appealed to his whimsical sense of humour, like the time when a bomb exploded in the night near where his regiment was encamped. His ears ringing from the noise, he roused a still sleeping soldier who drowsily exclaimed: "Oh! I fought I 'eard a fud."

Always scholarly, Tom took a great interest in European History. It was this knowledge which led to him becoming a member of the Communist Party after the war ended in 1945. It was quite fashionable in those times to be a member of the 'intelligentsia', as some circles were known, during the Cambridge Russian spy era. He particularly admired the French resistance and their opposition to the evils of fascism.

Tom's family were somewhat alarmed when he became a communist, but he secretly enjoyed being the 'black sheep' of the family. He was, however, sincerely driven by compassion for the downtrodden in society: the workers with few rights and the injustice of

some of the capitalist practices of the time.

It was when the myth of Stalinism exploded that he began to rethink his political allegiance, and resigned his membership. But Tom never gave up his socialist ideals and was ever on the side of the under-dog.

After demob, Tom returned to his former 'safe' job at 'the Pru', married Mickie in 1949 and lived in North Finchley in London. In 1964 several departments were moved out to Forbury Gardens in Reading, so Tom and Mickie, with their 3 children, moved too, to start a new life and make new friends.

After retirement, Tom decided to study for a BA with the Open University, taking Geography as his main subject. He also joined French and German circles, and developed an interest in local history. Sadly all this had to cease when he suffered a stroke in 1994 following a game of bowls on the village green. The stroke damaged the language area of his brain and he became dysphasic. To be suddenly deprived of language and unable to express all your thoughts, ideas and worries is unbelievably frustrating, but Tom battled on for 11 further years of increasing frailty and health problems, and never lost his delightful sense of humour.

He was, however, deeply sensitive about his plight and his shy nature had never made him an easy mixer. Fortunately his circle of good, understanding friends and neighbours helped him to enjoy a reasonable game of bridge at Firtree, and for the first time he applied himself to pencil sketching, showing flair in his drawings of houses and cottages.

Tom died as peacefully as we can tell during a period of respite care in a nursing home in Thornbury, where he had been visited daily by his family, to his great pleasure. Only a few hours beforehand, he and his oldest granddaughter had enjoyed a conversation about trips to France and Spain. Perhaps he was thinking about some of the happy journeys he had made, in the quiet time before his body decided enough was enough.