

Eulogy for Brian Stead

1930 – 2021

It's not so long ago that we said goodbye to Margaret and now we are here to say goodbye to Brian. Margaret said to me once that they wouldn't live long without each other, and so it has sadly proved, Brian living just shy of four months beyond Margaret. Their last few years together were marked poignantly by his care for her as she became frailer, when often his own needs were put aside. We can never forget the strong love and dedication he showed to Margaret, and his kindness and gentleness in dealing with her when she was distressed or confused. Their love for each other became ever more evident in these last few difficult years and we are the more fortunate for having been able to witness it.

Since Margaret's death Brian's own health took a turn for the worse and for most of this time, he was either in hospital or at Wells Lodge Care home. While recent years are dominated by what older age can

serve up, today is our chance to remember all of Brian's long and full life and to take inspiration from a life lived well.

Brian was born in May 1930 to Harry and Winifred and joined a sister Daphne to complete the Stead family. They lived in Coventry, at 125 Dane Road. His dad Harry was a manager of an engineering laboratory at the General Electric Company and his mum, Winifred, was a dressmaker and tailor and worked in the dress department at Owen Owen. The 30's we remember as a time of economic depression, with hunger marches, high levels of unemployment and the rise of fascism, which all contributed to the outbreak of the Second World War; so it wasn't the easiest of times to be a kid. Maybe there were some lighter moments as we learnt that Mickey Mouse was launched on the world in 1930, the Peak District Kinder Scout trespass took place and apparently nudist clubs flourished. In the Stead family though, education was seen as important as Brian enjoyed and did well at school. He did so well he became Head Boy of Bablake Grammar School. Bablake was founded in 1344, by Isabella of France, Queen of England to Edward II, so he must have felt very proud to be

head boy of such an illustrious school. Until the very end, despite a big clear out when he and Margaret moved house, he held onto his school hat and plaque. You might have seen, what to modern eyes seems a rather severe photo of him with the headmaster and what look like the school prefects. Brian still mentioned his headmaster, Mr Seaborne, even very recently as being an important influence in his life.

Coventry would have been a particularly difficult place to live during the war years. As the place the British car industry started Coventry was an important place for producing aeroplane engines, munitions and vehicles. The air raid on Coventry on the night of 14 November 1940 was the single most concentrated attack on a British city in the Second World War aiming to knock out Coventry as a major centre for war production. During that night Brian although only 10 played his own role, helping his dad who was an air raid warden. He told his niece Paula that an incendiary bomb landed in the attic of their home, and he was sent up to deal with it. Luckily, he survived to tell the tale. A lot of Coventry though was wiped out, including the cathedral, so

Brian as a teenager would have seen the devastating impact of war at close quarters and lived with the terrors of the time.

After Brian finished school at 18, he went to read chemistry at Birmingham University. Birmingham University was quite a special place coming as the fifth English University in 1900 with a different remit to the more established universities in Oxford, Cambridge, Durham, and London. It had an emphasis on developing a professional workforce and ground-breaking research to benefit industry. This suited Brian well, so well in fact that he went on to complete a PhD in chemistry, earning the title of Dr Stead.

Coming from a working family Brian then went on to find a job to put his academic research to practice. He joined one of the giants of British manufacturing of the time, the Imperial Chemical Industries, otherwise known as ICI. ICI made amongst other things general chemicals, pharmaceuticals, polymers, electronic materials, and plastics. It was noted for making that once popular material

Crimplene, which if it hadn't been so awful to wear could have seen the demise of the iron and ironing board for ever. The section that Brian joined and later led was the plastics research team. We have him to thank for bubble wrap and the Golden Wonder crisp packet. He started out working in Wales and ended up working in Welwyn Garden City hence living in St Albans for over 50 years. Unusual for modern times Brian stayed at ICI all his career, retiring at the relatively early age of 52 in 1982. Would it be too much to suggest that Brian's departure from ICI was probably when the rot started to set in and the beginning of its decline, as it closed up shop in 2008?

While Brian's professional life was full and impressive what was clearly most important to him was his family life and his marriage to Margaret. He and Margaret met on the Llangollen tennis courts. They hit it off quickly and on 27 March 1957, when Brian was 27 and Margaret 25, they married at Seion Methodist Chapel in Wrexham. With Brian's work taking him to England they bought a new house, 10

Thorpefield Close, and set about building a fine home, establishing a dream garden, and creating a new Stead family. The family with Robert in 1960, David in 1962 and Helen in 1965 were always put first. They had all that a secure family home could bring, support for their interests, encouragement of their friendships, great food with lots of home-grown vegetables and amazing holidays. Brian and Margaret were keen campers, so a lot of holidays involved trips around Britain with the tent in tow. These frequent trips away while full of family fun also gave Brian a chance to pursue his passion for birdwatching as well as a bit longer to delve into his daily Telegraph, one of his few bad habits that he never could quite shake.

Brian's multiple interests kept him busy aside from family and work. His vegetable gardening saw him growing the exotic spaghetti squash, artichokes, and asparagus long before they hit any grocers. This didn't discourage the annual glut of runner beans which were inflicted on anyone that passed. The gardening led to an interest in cooking and he and Margaret took themselves off on a variety of cordon bleu cookery courses. His home is full of cookery books and his freezer still

stuffed, showing his fine dining tastes accompanied by a keen interest in some equally fine wines.

Recording life through photography and film making were other passions of his and the family are fortunate to have such a great record of their lives. He was also a big techy, always buying the latest gadget, hence the numerous Alexas we have found and remote-controlled doorbells. He was historically the earliest of early adopters trying out computing and passing on his skills to his family. His science background didn't preclude the arts and music was a vital part of his life. He had a big collection of music, and many have commented how he spent time while cooking or in the garden, listening to football on the radio humming to himself. He and Margaret also had great fun on their regular trips to the West End theatres with their St Albans social group.

Retirement didn't mean the end of family responsibilities as grandchildren came along to a third Stead family headed up by David and Julia. In remembering their grandfather Jack and Tom reflected:

“We always looked forward to the week in summer that we’d spend in Thorpefield Close with Grandma and Grandpa, eating all of their peanut cookies and generally making a nuisance of ourselves. Year after year we always knew we’d have a lovely time, being taken on days out to the skatepark, Knebworth and the zoo, amongst many others. We’d spend literally hours throwing ourselves around soft furnished playgrounds, while Grandpa would sit, ever patiently, in an uncomfortable waiting area, engrossed in a newspaper, occasionally looking up to make sure we hadn’t injured ourselves too severely. We’ll always be grateful for his willingness to take us almost anywhere we wanted, and how happy he was to wait around whilst we had fun.

As much as we reminisce about those activity-filled days, we will always remember fondly the evenings that followed; sat around the table in the dining room enjoying home cooked meals (Shepherd’s pie, prawn salads and creme brûlée spring to mind), always delicious. One of the homeliest, cosiest memories we can conjure up is grandpa

pottering around the kitchen, humming loudly as he cooked. Truth be told, we find it hard to think about grandpa without the humming.

Grandpa's kindness, patience and calm massively contributed to some of the most beautiful parts of our childhood, for which we will be forever thankful."

This sums up Brian's character very well. Rob remembered an occasion when neighbours were grumbling about the state of another's front lawn, without fuss Brian went and cut the lawn. On their annual trips to Madeira, Brian would readily entertain new friends and encourage others to join him and Margaret. He was a constant supporter to all his family and an unfailing companion to Margaret; their life together was fulfilling and a joy to be around. Sadly, he missed the arrival of a new great grand-daughter, Delilah, born to Tom and Lauren on 7 Oct and the next generation of the Stead family, but through his many kindnesses and the example he set I know that his spirit and memory will live on.