

ALL SOULS COLLEGE CHAPEL

**THREE TRIBUTES GIVEN BY
JOHN VICKERS, PAUL GARDNER AND DAVID DAVIES**

IN MEMORY OF

PETER HARPER

14 November 1953 - 7 July 2023

Live-in Caretaker, 1998-2014
Lodge Porter, 1998-2018
Deputy Head Porter, 2018-2020

Monday, 7 August 2023 at 2:30 p.m.

John Vickers, Warden

We are gathered as Peter's family, friends and former colleagues to remember and give thanks for his life. Peter's death one month ago, in just his seventieth year, came as a great shock to each of us. It is fitting that we have come together today in this Chapel, just fifty paces from where Peter lived and worked all those years. He rang the Chapel bell on countless occasions, and now we are here for him.

On the front of your service sheet is the drawing of Peter by Ben Sullivan for the magnificent triptych portrait. Thoughtful Peter, the author, pen in hand, pad on knee. On the back, by contrast, is Peter having fun, very much off duty, but we all knew the humour well. At Peter's feet in the staff portrait are mother duck and the ducklings, for which he was celebrated. His words, taken from the fascinating memoir he wrote at retirement in the Spring of 2020, tell the story of what became an annual adventure:

"I happened to be cleaning the lodge one Sunday morning. Equipped with mop and bucket outside the lodge, I looked up and a duck, behind which trailed at least ten ducklings, was marching in a determined manner in my direction. ... I thought: If I open this door, she will cross the High Street with likely catastrophic consequences for her offspring. In the lodge there was a tray with a depth of say ten centimetres. On my hands and knees, I started to scoop up the ducklings and place them in the tray, but then one by one they started to hop back out – resembling a trick going horribly wrong. I abandoned the idea. There was nothing for it, I was going to have to stop the traffic. Opening the door, I did just that and ushered the duck and ducklings across the street in a relatively orderly fashion – but then an altercation occurred between myself and the mother duck. She wanted to head off in the direction of Logic Lane, whereas I intended to guide them (and, yes, I suppose on reflection it might have sounded somewhat alarming) down Magpie Lane. Logic Lane was illogical because of the distance involved. ... Out of desperation, and with amused tourists gathering all the while, I stooped down to push her in the direction of Magpie Lane. She hissed, and I unfortunately split my trousers. Nevertheless, I managed to herd them all into the lane and together we waddled down to Merton and into the meadow – then they were off, down to the river."

The story is about so much more than ducklings. It is about how Peter cared for us all, even in our less logical moments. The kindness, the resourcefulness, the selflessness, and the wit. What a wonderful man, and how we shall miss him.

Paul Gardner, Manciple Extraordinarius

Peter Harper - a remarkable man who graced us all with his humour, loyalty, wisdom, and friendship from the very first moment he met you. Peter joined the College in 1998, firstly as a Live-in Caretaker after making an acquaintance with the College as a delivery man for Bonners in the Covered Market. After about six months, a vacancy came up in the Porter's Lodge and Peter was able to combine his caretaking role at night, with that of a Lodge Porter by day. He continued in that dual role until 2014, when he finally gave up the Caretaker's flat and moved to Marston, but he continued as a Lodge and then finally as the Deputy Head Porter, until his retirement in April 2020.

The Porter

Peter greeted everyone like a long lost friend, even if you had only just met him and he played a pivotal role in making Fellows and Staff feel at home when they joined the College for the very first time, enabling us all to settle in quickly by offering help, advice and assistance in his role as a Lodge Porter, and latterly as a trusted friend and colleague.

The Lodge was a very busy place during Peter's tenure, especially in the mornings when a myriad of tasks had to be completed first thing, as Fellows rang, emailed or checked in for meals, post and visitors, students checked in for lectures and directions, staff checked in for keys, mail and meal booking updates, contractors checked in for parking and contractor passes, suppliers checked in for deliveries and members of the Public tried to wander into the Front Quad on the off-chance. Enough to keep anyone on their toes, but Peter always gave everyone the absolute best attention and went out of his way to go the extra mile,

whether it was helping housekeeping to return gowns to Fellows rooms the morning after a College feast,

helping the Bursary meet tight deadlines by collecting urgent mail for posting at the very last minute, and taking it up to the Post Office,

arranging for spare keys to be taxied up to Beechwood late at night after a Fellow or visitor had found themselves locked out,

sorting out a mix-up with a lecture room, or more often an incorrect meal booking, or changing sheets and making up a guest room bed after an unannounced Fellow's guest arrived last minute, usually late on a weekend.

Frequently Peter would sort out somebody else's errors (occasionally mine) and would as a matter of courtesy advise me of the issue long-since rectified by him. I'd sometimes ask Peter if he had informed the miscreant, "Naw" Peter would say, "I don't want to make a fuss!"

It often fell to Peter to train the new Porters and Head Porters. Known for his vast knowledge of the College, one appraisal reports that Peter explained to a new Head Porter "How the College Works," never mind just the complexities of the Lodge! Peter was modest about his own accomplishments and his abilities. I can remember on frequent occasions asking him to step up to Deputy-Head Porter. "Naw", Peter would say, "I don't want the responsibility, I'd rather leave things as they are." In the end, so many people referred to Peter as the Deputy Head Porter that he finally agreed to take the position.

Similarly, when it finally came to Peter planning for his retirement, I said that the College would undoubtedly hold a large farewell gathering in Peter's honour in Hall. Peter looked at me and uttered the same words, "Naw, I don't want to make a fuss." Unfortunately for the College, Peter's retirement coincided in the midst of the pandemic when the country was in lockdown, so Peter's wish was granted, and he just quietly extended his furlough into retirement. However, the following year Peter was deservedly "ambushed" by the Warden, whilst attending my farewell and an overdue fuss of him was made by all. Now here again today, in this beautiful Chapel, we can say a final farewell to Peter, but it is also fitting that whilst he has left us, his handiwork has not.

Peter was a perfectionist, but occasional mistakes can occur. (These are Peter's words, not mine).

The Perfectionist:

Often Peter would help return the Cross and Candlesticks back to the Pantry, and towards the end of his time at College, on a visit to the Lodge, he showed me a tall tapered triangular block of wood with a narrow-raised tongue at the top. I recognised the shape but couldn't quite place it. When I asked, Peter said that he had hand-carved a new wooden mount for the silver Altar Cross, as the top of the old wooden mount was worn and the Cross did not sit correctly when placed on top. This had not gone un-noticed by Peter and the perfectionist within him means that his handiwork graces the Altar today and will continue to do so for many years to come.

The occasional mistake

A new Exam Fellow joined the College and was given one of the small dormer studies on a particular staircase in the Front Quad. On arrival, the new Fellow turned up with an industry standard electrically powered running machine. Peter helpfully decided to assist, managing to slip the machine in under the nose of the Manciple, before helping haul this heavy lump of metal up three flights of narrow stairs, leaving it firmly wedged in the Fellows room. Some weeks later, a senior Fellow in the room below reported some worrying cracks had started to appear in the solid oak cross members of his ceiling, which had also dropped. A subsequent investigation revealed that the Exam Fellow was extensively using the machine in the evenings and at weekends. The resultant vibrations were slowly shaking the lathe and plaster ceiling below, together with the supporting floor beam above, to pieces. Later, after a mini crane had trundled in from the High Street with some difficulty past

the Lodge and into the Front Quad, and a new heavy steel structural girder had been perilously swung through the small casement window into the dormer room before being bolted into position, Peter ruefully reflected that perhaps that was not one of his most helpful decisions!

Peter was much more than an extremely capable Lodge Porter.

A Carpenter

As a carpenter Peter built sheds, mended fences, fixed cupboards, put up shelving, made furniture, painted, and decorated and carried out odd jobs for people whenever he could.

An Artist

As an artist, Peter painted imaginatively, using oil to paint large canvases of intriguing geometrical shapes in bright bold colours, which depict vaguely familiar backgrounds, and left me admiring Peter's creativity. I am aware that some of these works now adorn the medieval walls of a senior Fellow's study and I expect elsewhere too, given Peter's generosity.

A Historian

As an amateur historian, Peter was fascinated by the history of architecture which may have stemmed from when he was first shown the Great Quad after he had made a delivery to the College from the Covered Market. In his memoir "A Journey" that he presented to the College shortly before he retired, Peter states that he was "Overwhelmed" by the "Breathtaking Architecture." Subsequently he was to spend many hours in the Library talking to Norma and Gaye whilst researching his passion and imparting his knowledge to visitors and guests alike.

A Gardener

As a gardener he grew and delivered produce to many friends, pensioners, and colleagues, from rhubarb to beans from his allotment and potting shed. Throughout his time in Oxford, Peter mowed lawns, cut hedges, and tidied up gardens for the Great and the Good, and through this work, could count on the patronage of Sir Edward Peck and Sir Alex Caincross, with Sir Edward providing a reference to the then-Bursar, Dr. Bailey, when he first applied for the position of Lodge Porter.

A Writer

As a writer of gripping fiction, his published first book *Cascade* had anyone who has read it, on the edge of their seat with its pace and page turning twists. Jo, my wife, invited Peter to speak as guest author at her book group where they couldn't believe that he had not visited the many places he so vividly described, as his descriptions were so compelling. In 2017 the book was picked up by the Crime Writers Association founded by John Creasey, and Peter enjoyed a very favourable review. Peter's later books *Death of a Lie* and *Agenda Indiscriminate* followed a similar pace, filled with intrigue and suspense, with all three books hinting at his love of architecture

as he set the various scenes for the reader to immerse themselves in.

A Conversationalist

Most of all Peter enjoyed engaging in conversation, keen to debate or just to listen to the experiences and learned views from members of the College community who stopped by for a chat in the evenings or weekends in a sometimes otherwise deserted Lodge. However, on the odd occasion when I might try to spin a yarn, Peter would always follow it up with “Really?” before breaking out in that familiar grin and I knew that I was beaten. His care and attention to everything he did or in every encounter you had with Peter is just one of the many reasons why he is so fondly remembered.

One Memorable Night

I would like to elaborate on one incident that Peter mentions in his memoir and that is the story about the Hawksmoor Tower fire alarms. My main contact with Peter, it often seemed, was usually at weekends and at night. An exceptional Porter by day and a dutiful Caretaker during the silent hours, Peter could feel every groan and shudder as he and the College buildings settled down for the night, only for him to be too frequently, loudly and rudely awakened by a cry of anguish from the fire siren within the Porter’s flat;... whilst at the other end, in one of the furthestmost upper reaches of the Hawksmoor Towers, a smoke alarm took offence to the peace of the night and wailed incessantly into the darkness. Too often, as I came in for work the following morning, Peter would make me aware of the issue, and too often yet another callout by the fire alarm provider fixed nothing that seemed to work for long. One night, Peter had a cunning plan and decided to fix the issue once and for all. On the next instance, Peter rang me at two minutes into deep sleep and summoned me back into the College. Bleary eyed, at about midnight past caring, we both attended the Tower cloaked in darkness, and climbed the narrow spiral staircase, squeezing through an old oak door into a large room with a huge water tank dominating the space within.

Peter pointed upwards with the Lodge’s standard issue pencil thin torch, its weak yellow glow slightly brighter than a poorly stubbed out cigarette-end, and compelled me to climb the sheer vertical ladder up to the defiant smoke alarm dangling from the high ceiling above the water tank, whilst he gamely gave me encouragement, reminding me that for him this was routine! He then guided me through the lengthy procedure for clearing and resetting the alarm before finally we both safely descended and tip-toed down the spiral staircase and out of the tower for fear of waking up the smoke alarm. The next morning i.e., a few sleep-deprived hours later, I duly called out the fire alarm provider and promptly ordered the deactivation of the alarm immediately. For good measure Peter was presented with a new flashlight, whose lineage could be traced back to Luke Skywalker’s Light Sabre. Peter had accomplished his mission in style!

Finally, I was privileged to be given a copy of a short poem, penned by Peter about the Lodge Clock, which I had taken pains to get serviced shortly after my arrival.

For many years, the poem lived in my office desk drawer, but I made sure it came home with me when I retired. The family have graciously allowed me to share Peter's poem with you all today. I will try to do it justice. But, first, I need to set the scene. It is a quiet Sunday morning at All Souls College. Term has finished and the Lodge is faithfully staffed by Peter, alone except for the ever-accompanying rhythmic metallic sound of the old pendulum wall clock, which enters his every thought with each second that ticks falteringly by.

The Clock

Peter Harper

Morning

The Clock ticketh in the Porter's Lodge
Ticketh, Ticketh, and yet more Ticketh.
Ticketh thy life away, thy sayeth,
Ney, Screameth.
This cursed ticketh,
That sendeth any man...madder than mad
That hath the guts to echoeth
within thy slumbering spirit,
And even to danceth gleefully
Upon thy soul.

Afternoon

The clock continues to ticketh in the Porter's Lodge
I swear it doth persecuteth me
and that it mocketh me too
as it ticketh brazenly into space.
I hear it laugheth at me...
...but thy despair, hath hatched a cunning assault
As it ticketh merrily away.
I will *seize* the contraption from off the wall
and *jumpeth* upon its confidence
Until knee deepeth amongst its *wretched workings!*
But alas, thy heart knoweth,
that this *damned* ticketh...
hath impregnate thy mind.
Until the day a wooden chariot cometh and collecteth me,
and free-eth me from this confounded ticketh, ticketh, ticketh, ticketh,
ticketh.....

David Davies

It's an honor to have an opportunity to say a few words for Peter here today. We will all remember him in his role as a porter of All Souls College where, like the staff today, he was an ambassador to the role as front of house. He was professional, respected and much loved by all - and not forgetting our dear friend Colin Tasker - was part of an amazing team. The Warden has mentioned his role as a lollipop man controlling the traffic outside so the ducks could make their way to the river, and he had also written a poem about the clock.

However, it's another side of Peter I would like to briefly touch on today, where he was kind, warm hearted, and cheerful. Vicky and I were very fortunate to get closer to him when, after having two operations we persuaded him to rest and recover at our home, rather than stay at his lodge at All Souls. I feel slightly guilty now though as looking back I rested more than him. For when I returned home from work, Peter would greet me with a handshake and glass of wine and we would sit in the garden and chat about our families and friends, laugh and joke about our tales from the past. We discovered we both had shares in Millwall FC and owned premium bonds and dreamed about a big win. His close friend Peter Coates reminded me how his decision to stay in Oxford was with a toss of a coin, and he started working for Bonners Green Groceries in the covered market. He then applied for All Souls, and I remember him telling me that at the time he was nervous applying for such a privileged role in a prestigious College, and that he was so proud when he became part of the wonderful All Souls community, which I too am privileged to feel part of.

One day, coming home from work I discovered that Peter had taken a day off work and built an open wooden porch on our back door. He explained where to hang our wet coats and place our muddy boots; and there was even a clothes line where he said we could hang dirty socks and underwear. We both laughed at that and quickly agreed we would find another use for it. He also built himself a remarkable man-cave on his own property, displaying his creative skills as a handyman, where he could relax and grow his vegetables. From this he would attend gardens for friends and also find an opportunity to visit Judy.

Once, when my parents stayed with us, my mum asked if she could meet him, so he came round one evening and laughed and joked with her, and also talked to my dad about this new book he was writing. Suddenly, he jumped up and politely informed us he had to leave. When we asked why he replied: "I have to make sure all the Fellows have got home safe and are tucked up in bed", and we all laughed.

Peter would often visit us and had an uncanny way of knowing when Vicky would cook delicious king prawns, and just happen to be passing. We would note that if we hadn't seen him for a while we would cook prawns, and sure enough he would

turn up. During his last visit he mentioned his recent holiday in Crete, where the landlady explained she couldn't use the air conditioning because the pigeons would perch on the outside assembly unit. So one morning Peter set off and returned with some wire meshing and mounted it to prevent the pigeons perching there and making a mess. I asked if he got a discount on his accommodation and he replied: "no, no – it needed doing." Such was his kindness. On the same holiday, he tried to hire a push bike from a cycle shop, but ended up buying one on condition he could sell it back - he did this and somehow made a profit.

At a New Year's Eve party with us in 2014, I took a photo of him. It was just another photo. But if you look at it closely, it has captured his character which many of us have had the pleasure to experience and enjoy.

I'm sure there will be other stories we can all share later, but for now let us remember Peter as someone who was creative and talented, and a friend who chose to be a porter, a gardener, a handyman, and a writer. To us though, he will always be Peter – thoughtful, gracious and cheerful.